

THE MAN FROM **U.N.C.L.E.**

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NAPOLEON SOLO ★ ILLYA KURYAKIN



Nightmare horror threatens the free world, as Solo and Illya fight to track down and destroy THRUSH's new, most diabolical weapon of all.

THE LIGHT-KILL AFFAIR

A NEW Complete Novel of
Incredible Suspense by

ROBERT HART DAVIS

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Deep in an uncharted jungle, Solo and Illya come to death grips with THRUSH's new, most lethal weapon, a madness-spawned, all powerful cannibal plant which feeds only on one kind of food—human flesh!

ACT I—INCIDENT OF THE PETRIFIED JUNGLE

THE TWO MEN crept through the jungle quiet, slowing involuntarily, puzzled and infected by the poison of unexplained dread.

Actually, silence is even stranger in a Central American jungle than in noonday Manhattan. The deeper they penetrated this unearthly stillness the more they suffered from the unrelenting intense humidity.

"Something's fouled up, Diego," Don Sayres whispered, feeling as if his voice carried like the crack of a rifle.

"I'm afraid we're lost, Senor Sayres," Diego said.

"Something more significant than that. Where are the monkeys? Where are the birds? This place is deadly quiet."

Sayres stopped walking, held up his hand. A blue-green haze hung over the rotted swamp growth. Distantly above them through a tight-woven vine canopy the sun glittered.

"What sort of compass reading you get, Diego? I have no idea where we are."

"The needle whirls," Diego said. "Only this has not changed in the last hour."

"Okay. Forget the compass." Sayres' handsome young face was masked with sweat and anxiety narrowed his eyes. He turned all the way around, not afraid, but deeply concerned. No matter where he looked, there was only matted swamp life, and his own breathing was the loudest sound.

"Look for some kind of high ground. We'll setup."

Diego nodded and hacked his way through ferns, vines and wild lilies with his machete. Finding even a knoll open to the sky was a matter of an hour's search. Diego shinnied up a cabbage palm, searched with his hand shielding his eyes. He found something to his liking and leaped to the muck, nodding.

On a grassy island in the tangled swamp Sayres opened the small kit he'd carried strapped to his back.

Diego Viero watched, awed, as the kit offered up electronic gear like a conjurer's bag.

"It's been a long time I've been away from headquarters," he said.
"U.N.C.L.E. had no such gear the last time I was there."

Sayres was too intent upon his work to reply. What unfolded to look like a small radar skeletal proved to be a long range viewer with a breathtaking difference. Sayres adjusted it and when he and Diego studied it the small dial was homed in on a distant area as clearly as across an open plain.

Sayres explained quickly the operation of this viewer to Diego.

"What I want you to do," he said, "is to turn this knob, which moves the scanner on a three-hundred-sixty-degree area. At each turn, fine-tune with this knob, which will home in on given distances as if there were no trees or jungle in the way. Move it slowly. Check it from zero to its ultimate reach; then move on to the next setting."

Diego nodded. "You mind saying what I'm looking for, Senor Sayres?"

Sayres was already setting up a two-way radio transmitter in a pack no larger than the palm of his hand.

"I wish I could tell you," he said. "I think you'll recognize it as quickly as I would. We want to pick up anything that doesn't belong in this jungle, man, woman, building or child. If Dr. Ivey Nesbitt is down here—and I no longer think he is—we'll find him out here, or we won't find him at all. And my bet is we won't find him at all."

"Why have you come so deep in this place if you feel our search is doomed to fail?"

Sayres gave the Spanish-born agent a faint grin. "You have been a long time away from headquarters, Diego. Ours is not to question why. Waverly says a man named Ivey Nesbitt has disappeared. The U.N.C.L.E. computers churn, the facts are sifted, and Waverly tells Solo to assign a man to find Nesbitt and bring him back home. So here we are."

Diego started to speak, but Sayres lifted his hand, silencing him.

He spoke into the miniature microphone. "Open channel six, please. This is Equator calling Chancy, please."

After a moment, Alexander Waverly's crisp accents crackled on a speaker even smaller than the microphone. "Chancy here, Equator. Recording systems set. Go ahead with your report, please. Over."

Sayres gave his precise latitude, longitude bearings. "We are now set up for long-view scanning. We will now take a three-hundred-sixty degree reading. If you will hold this channel open, we'll make our report."

He handed the small set to Diego, who held the microphone close to Sayres' lips.

Sayres took over working the long-view scanner. He set for distance, for range, direction, then worked the fine tuner. He worked casually, expecting nothing, making his report lethargically.

Suddenly Sayres swore in startled surprise.

Diego forgot the open channel. He gripped Sayres' arm. "Senor! What is it?"

Sayres shook his head, waving the other agent away. He stared at the small scanner, speaking into the mike, his voice flat with disbelief. "It's a laboratory, sir. At first it looked like a large green house." He gave the reading on the range and distance finder as from his bearing. "This makes even less sense. But here goes. The lab is glass walled. Makes it easy to see inside. In there, the place is equipped like General Electric.

"I don't believe it. There are at least half a dozen people working down there, although there are no other buildings around, and absolutely no roads leading in or out of the clearing... Oh, there's the answer to that, sir. A helicopter. That's how they come and go, all right. And in the lab is plant life, exactly like that growing outside, which makes no sense at all, except that some of the plants are in smallest pots and others are giant-sized. And now everybody down there is running around wildly, like ants in a stirred hill, and—"

Sayres stopped talking when Diego cried out.

Sayres dropped to his knees, turning, radio and scanner forgotten.

Death flew in on a silence even more intense than the eerie quiet they'd plodded through all morning.

Sayres stared at Diego. It was as if he were suddenly illumined by a million-watt intensification of sunlight. He straightened convulsively and then crumpled dead to the ground.

Sayres plunged forward, scrambling away from the dead agent and his gear.

It was then he realized that something had broken the silence, a sharp hissing sound.

Sayres threw himself into the concealment of a tree, gazing across the knoll and the jungle beyond. The tops of the trees, the high vines, everything had been crisped, burned gray and dead.

Then Sayres saw the beam of light swing across the tops of the trees, leaving petrified ash in its wake.

The beam returned, lower this time.

Sayres held his breath, crouching behind the tree. He no longer deceived himself; this tree was no more protection against that beam of light than a leaf.

He heeled around, crouched low and plunged into the swampy undergrowth. Behind him he heard the hiss as the light burned trees, leaves, vines, searching for him.

He did not stop to look back. He didn't have to, because the light beam reached beyond him. The range was being steadily increased and he saw that they were going to let him run into it.

He flung himself face down into the mud. He thrust his hand into his jacket and brought out a small vial with spray attachment.

Holding the nozzle toward him, Sayres closed his eyes and turned, sitting up. His thumb came down on the sprayer, but it was too late. The light beam struck him, seeming to glance across him.

He stayed a moment in that rigid position as if instantly petrified by that incredible heat. He tottered slightly, and then did not move again. He was dead.

TWO

NAPOLEON SOLO faced the four people about the conference table.

"And that's it," Solo said, scowling. "Sayres' report ends there, abruptly."

Solo was medium tall, slender, with dark brown hair, now mussed. He could have been, at first glance, a doctor, lawyer, advertising man. Despite the conservative cut of his business suit, he didn't belong to the ordinary career world. He was skilled in the strange art of super-spying.

"I believe the outcry came from the young Spanish agent," Alexander Waverly said.

Of an age known only to himself and U.N.C.L.E. computers, neither of which were at all communicative on the subject, Waverly was the veteran of two world wars, several police engagements, and a dedicated referee in a continuing cold war.

"He must have died first," Waverly said. "What was his name? Oh, yes. Diego. A good man. He'd been down in Central America for some years. Due a transfer. It was his report that first confirmed my suspicions that perhaps Dr. Ivey Nesbitt was down there."

"Sayres must be presumed dead, too," Solo said. Death was a part of his daily life in the United Net work Command for Law and Enforcement, but each loss of one of his men diminished him by that much, struck him with an anguish he carefully concealed.

"Then the next move is up to us," Illya Kuryakin said. "Some body killed Don."

Illya stood up. Slender, youthful appearing, with a Slavic face testifying to his ancestry and unruly blond hair showing him too concerned with the business of life and death to care much for grooming. "Don was a personal friend of mine. I'd like the assignment."

"I should have the assignment," April Dancer protested. She had the kind of loveliness that in a less taut moment made business difficult of transacting. You never observed her once without looking back again in pleasure and disbelief. Admiring April was like taking one of those quickie European tours; there wasn't time to appreciate the view.

"If you'll remember, Napoleon," she said, "it was my assignment in the first place. At the last minute Don replaced me."

"There must have been a good reason why you were replaced, April," Mark Slate said in his perfect English diction. He pushed his hand through his matted light-brown hair. "The jungle is no place for a woman, especially when we don't even know what killed those two men. I think I—"

"And I think I've heard enough!" Waverly stood up suddenly. The command room rang with the sound of his voice. "Is this a quiet Monday in some small town fire station? I understand that each of you feels deeply the loss of a man like Sayres. I am not unmindful of the sadness of this situation for all of you. But you are all professional people. You've been here long enough to know assignments are never made on basis of personal involvement."

April, Mark and Illya glanced ruefully at each other.

Waverly said, "Now, if we may get on with the pertinent aspects of this case. Our report pins down the precise location where Sayres set up the scanner and met his death. He reports a large laboratory and gives us its exact location in relation to his position. This is our last contact with Sayres.

"But it gives us a great deal to work on, more than we have had. And the fact that a jungle laboratory has been so handsomely equipped convinces me that Dr. Ivey Nesbitt is down there. Is that your conclusion, Mr. Solo?"

Solo nodded. "It's worth further investigation. I believe this lab is part of some plan of THRUSH, and I believe that if Dr. Nesbitt is down there that he has gone over to THRUSH."

"We don't know how Diego and Sayres met their death," Waverly mused. "But it is clear that they were being as closely watched as possible. Even when Sayres set up the scanner, the people must have known it through some detection system unknown to us yet."

"I can't understand why Sayres failed to activate his plastic shield," Illya said. He placed a small vial on the table before him. This matched the sprayer Sayres had brought from his pocket in the jungle at the instant he was killed.

Illya touched the nozzle. A faint mist appeared and hardened instantly into an almost invisible shield of plastic.

"Looks like death was instantaneous," Mark Slate said. "We know he had the warning of Diego's outcry. That's there clearly on the tape."

"Exactly," Waverly agreed. "For that reason, Mr. Solo, I suggest you follow up this investigation personally. However, I suggest you make no contacts, even with our own people, except to hire a guide when you reach San Miguel. And I'm sure I hardly need urge you to travel incognito."

THREE

THE SLIGHTLY stooped man who disembarked from the banana boat in the port city of San Miguel bore no resemblance to Napoleon Solo.

He wore a shapeless panama hat, wrinkled white coat and creased white pants. His string tie was awry at the collar of his sweated shirt. He stared at the world over the tops of rimless glasses.

He carried a small pack, a straw suitcase and an oversized butterfly net. He drank *anejo* on the rocks in a waterfront bodega and asked for a guide who might lead him far into the jungles.

The bartender smiled at his other patrons. "And what would a man like you be looking for in that jungle—armed with just a net?"

"I am a hunter of rare species of butterflies and other lepidopterous specimen," Solo said. "I believe the rarest species of all are to be found in your inner jungle regions."

"That's a big net for butterflies," the bartender said.

"I don't want to hurt them."

The bartender grinned slyly. "It's beeg enough to catch girls, Professor."

"I don't want to hurt them, either," Solo said.

The bartender laughed. "You're all right, old fellow. But I don't think you'll find a guide to take you into the jungle. Only recently two men went from this town into the jungle and have not returned. The guides don't even like to go in there now with game hunters. I know they won't want to go with nothing more to protect them than a butterfly net."

"I'm sure that's all the protection we'll need."

"One goes into the jungle, he finds trouble," the bartender said, shaking his head.

Solo shook his grey head and gave him a bland smile. "Perhaps this is true for those who seek trouble, sir. But trouble is the last thing I am looking for."

The bartender's words followed him into the dusty street. "Just pray that trouble isn't the first thing you find, senor, no matter what you are looking for."

Solo walked down the dirt road and stopped before the man sitting in front of the adobe house. The man's name was Carrero and he lived in the house with ball a dozen small children and a slovenly half- breed wife underfoot. He shook his head. "I no go in jungle. Something very bad happen."

"I am sure this is just superstition," Solo said.

"Death comes quiet. Silent. Quicker than the strike of a snake. The jungle is burned dry by the touch of this death."

"Butterflies," Solo persisted with that bland smile.

He kept smiling and placing money in a small green stack before the widening eyes of Carrero and family until the anguished man could no

longer resist what looked to him like a fortune.

Senora Carrero wept and the children ran out in the potted road, clinging to Carrero's tattered pant legs.

Solo gave the children candy and placed ten dollars in Senora Carrero's trembling hand. "Buy yourself a hat, Senora, and I vow to bring your husband back safely—and with a huge butterfly to wear on your bonnet."

But before they were ten miles into the swamplands, Solo found the shuffling gait of the lepidopterist too slow, and the large net, which caught on every obstruction, a burden and he discarded both.

Carrero regarded him with sick eyes, seeing they were not on the trail of insects after all.

That night the drizzling mists in the rain forests washed out the last traces of dye from Solo's dark brown hair. When he awakened the next morning from his sleeping hammock, he tossed aside the rimless glasses.

Carrero stared at him in sick horror.

Solo winced, knowing the man was seeing a bearded young man in place of a kindly gray elder.

Carrero looked about as if seeking an escape.

"Don't run," Solo warned him.

"You are no butterfly hunter. You are here to seek trouble. Bad trouble. I owe you nothing. I do not have to stay."

Solo gazed at him levelly. "If you stay with me, I'll make every effort to protect you. I vowed to your wife I'd return you safely, even if I begin to wonder what it is she prizes about you. If you run, I promise you, you'll never make it back—except in pieces."

Carrero stared at him a moment defiantly, and then lost all defiance. "Senor, I am a simple man. I want no trouble. Please. A simple man."

"Then, let's leave it that way. You take me where I want to go and I'll bring you back."

Carrero rolled his black eyes, and crossed himself three times.

On the third morning Solo stared at the small round object Carrero had puzzledly watched him study often since they entered the jungle.

"We've reached the place I was looking for," Solo said. "Relax."

"How do you know the place if you have never been here?" Carrero asked, shaking his head.

"By this gadget. It was set before I left New York. Not even disturbances that throw off a compass will alter it. The horizontal and the vertical red lines are exactly one on the other. Do you see that?"

Carrero nodded, but he hardly dared look at the small object—undoubtedly witchcraft. He glanced about, seeing nothing except the grassy knoll, like an island in the sea of jungle pressing in upon them.

But Solo had forgotten the frightened guide. He opened his kit and set up a long-view scanner exactly like the one Sayres had used in this place except that it was set as to range and distance to the markings given in Sayres' report.

Solo tuned in the gear. The small viewer showed him nothing but a rectangular area of marshy undergrowth. Every test proved that the settings were right.

Solo swore.

Carrero ventured forward timidly. "What is wrong, Senor?"

"Everything," Solo spoke mostly to himself. "There's no building down there. Nothing."

"Building, Senor? Naturally not. Not here in this jungle."

"Well, there's supposed to be! There's got to be!" Solo spoke vehemently and the guide retreated a step.

He reset the dials, glanced at Carrero. "You want to go with me?"

The guide nodded, eyes wide. "I wish only not to be left alone in this place, even for a minute."

"Then stay close behind me."

"Senor need not worry about this, either. As his shadow is there, so will I be."

They plodded through under growth until the red lines of the dial matched again. Solo spent an hour chopping away the high swamp growth.

He felt the emptiness of defeat. According to Sayres' final report, a glass-walled lab had stood only days ago in this place, a cleared area with space for landing a helicopter.

He shook his head. There was no trace of building and it seemed incredible that vines and trees could grow so lush in such a short time.

"No!" He spoke aloud. "There's got to be an answer." He stared at Carrero without really seeing him. "We've got to find it, that's all."

Solo prowled the underbrush a moment. Then he said, "Carrero, you're a jungle man. You could find out where you were by the growth, feed yourself, if you were lost, eh?"

"You think us hopelessly lost, Senor?" Carrero's face twisted.

"No. But I think if these plants are younger, newer, it should show. Do you understand?"

"Young plants, no matter how tall, are more tender than the older. Young plants seldom have the berries that sustain life."

"Now you're thinking, Carrero. That's what I want. You find where these young plants meet older growth. We should be surrounded by it. Mark it all out, and we'll narrow down the area that much."

In less than an hour, Carrero had hacked out a rectangle that could have been the base for a glass-walled laboratory. Inside this area, Solo hacked with machete until he found what he had been sure must remain, the foundation for those walls.

He shouted in his pleasure. Carrero came running. Solo was smiling through his three days beard, sweat and mud.

"Here it is! Here it stood. Look, traces of garbage, food tins, broken glass, inside this foundation footing. We've found our butterflies, Carrero!"

"*Si! Si!*" Carrero looked around timidly. "We can now go home, no?"

Solo nodded, hardly hearing what the guide said.

He returned to the long-range scanner on the knoll. It was as if he had found the key piece of a jig saw puzzle. Everything else fell into place.

He found bits of electronic gear to show where Sayres' scanner had been destroyed. He found bones and teeth that must once have been Diego Viero and after a long search he found shoes with the x-marked identification tags.

He gazed at the tags before he dropped them into his pocket. His face was bleak. Not only had Diego and Sayres been slain, but their bodies and their equipment had been destroyed.

"All right, Carrero," Solo said at last. "Let's go home."

FOUR

THE NIGHT BEFORE they reached the village where Carrero lived, Napoleon Solo stepped back into his stooped, gray-haired person as the

naturalist. Carrero watched in disbelief as he dyed his hair, donned rimless glasses.

Carrero spoke hesitantly. "You are a man for whom I have learned great respect, Mr. Solo. You are a very smart man, but more, you are a brave one. I am glad, now that I reach safety, that I accompanied you on this strange trip, even if I went reluctantly."

Solo nodded absently. "Thanks, Carrero. You're a brave man, too."

"No. I am a man who thinks of his wife—fat as she is—and his children. I worry if I do not return alive to them."

"It won't be long now."

"I know. This troubles me. You return now to your disguise. This means that though trouble has ended for Carrero, it is not over for you."

"I'm afraid it hasn't really begun yet," Solo said in that bland tone, peering over his glasses.

At ten the next morning, Solo tottered into the shipping office at the San Miguel docks.

A young man stared at him across the desk. "May I help you, sir?"

"Yes. You can." Solo's voice was testy. "Indeed, you'd better. I have been expecting a shipment of scientific equipment. I can't even preserve my priceless specimens without it. It should have been delivered to me days ago."

"I'm sorry, sir," the young man said in a voice that couldn't have cared less. "If your materials had arrived, they would have been delivered to your hotel."

Solo pounded on the desk. "They arrived on the same boat with me, young man! Don't take that tone to me! Ill report you to the head of this company."

The young man shrugged. "You do that, sir."

Solo practically danced in impatience. "See, sir, I was an instructor of the man who owns this company. A word from me and you'll be reprimanded for your incompetence. Now I shall go back and inspect the shipping in your warehouse. I have no doubt I'll find my materials rotting back there!"

Solo strode toward the rear of the huge warehouse. The young clerk ran around the desk. He shouted, "You can't go back there, sir!"

But Solo was already through the doors into the dark cavernous storage rooms. The young clerk stopped at the door. Perhaps the old fellow's goods had been misplaced by some of the native handlers. Maybe he did know the company president. And besides it was too hot to run in this weather

Solo wasted no time in pretending to look for a non-existent shipment of scientific materials. He knew what he was looking for and he searched, swiftly, diligently, and successfully.

He straightened from the feigned stoop of the naturalist and gazed at the huge crates. He walked in triumph among them. He was incredulous at the variety of articles being transferred, lab equipment, materials, and crate after crate of plants, all seemingly alike, and all of different stages of growth.

Pleased, he ran his hand across the address label. All were addressed the same: Via Air Freight from Mexico City to Helena, Montana, and reshipment by freight to Big Belt, Montana.

He heard the whisper of sound behind him. It was like the skittering of mice, and yet he went tense, instantly alert to danger.

The three men were young. They were Latin, dressed sharply. They walked shoulder to shoulder in their dark shirts and ice-cream suits and sleek new panama straw hats.

Solo was not fooled. The dark outline of shoulder holsters showed at their armpits.

They approached him steadily, their smiles fixed and unwavering. There was evil in their smiling, older than any of them.

Solo felt the hackles rising along the nape of his neck and he grinned blandly at them, retreating.

"Stand still, old fellow," one of them invited.

"What's the matter, young gentlemen?" Solo asked in the quavering voice of a teacher.

"We're going to take you apart, Uncle, and find out what's the matter," one of them said.

"There's some mistake, Solo said, retreating.

They came toward him steadily.

"We'll know after we take you apart, Uncle," one of the attackers said.

"If we are wrong, we'll apologize—"

"Yeah. To each separate part of you," the third said, laughing as if drunk.

Suddenly Solo grabbed a case and jerked it between himself and the three men. The crate landed with a crash.

Solo didn't wait to see what happened. Bent over in the manner of an old man, he raced toward the rear exit of the warehouse. He saw the sunlight out there, the open docks, the waiting ships at anchor. They looked incredibly far.

He thrust his hand into his jacket pocket, drew out a friction bomb. It was no larger than a capsule.

Still running, he turned and threw the capsule with all his strength toward the packing cases.

The explosion and fire were brief but intense. Concussion drove the men back. Solo ran.

He ran out on the docks without looking back. In the brilliant sunlight, he paused. The piers stretched endlessly in the silence and the heat. Lethargic quiet lay across the waterfront and the town.

He turned toward town and the main street. He had not run more than a dozen steps when one of the attackers appeared from a wall door.

He was no longer immaculate. His ice cream suit was smudged, black and torn. His hat was gone, but he was driven now by rage.

He had drawn his gun and when he saw Napoleon Solo he fired.

Tuh. Tuh.

Solo threw himself behind a small stack of cotton. The silenced gun chattered again. Bullets splintered the dock.

Solo hung close to the cotton bale. His sweated fingers closed on his last friction bomb.

He pressed there, counting, his arm poised to throw. He heard the pound of steps as the gunman ran toward him.

Now! he thought.

He tossed the friction bomb upward, arching it over the cotton bale. The explosion was sharp, the screams of the young hoodlum wild, and at that precise instant, Solo heard the *tuh, tuh* of a second silenced gun behind him.

He didn't bother looking over his shoulder. He burrowed there in between the cotton and the wall of the building.

"Ho, Pedro!" The call came from farther down the wharf.

Nearer, the first gunman still yelled in agony.

The second had slowed now, made wary by what he saw happening to his partner.

They approached the cotton warily, waiting until the three of them were regrouped. They spread out slightly now and crept forward in tile sunlight, guns drawn.

From where he crouched, panting, Solo watched their shortened shadows creep toward him. The biggest part of the shadows it seemed to him were the guns in those outstretched hands.

"Ho," one of them said. "Why should we walk in on him and his friction bombs? Fire from where we are into the cotton. We drive him out, or we kill him. It's all one."

"I've a better idea," said the man who'd been blasted a second time. "Burn him out. I want to burn him out."

Crouched under the bales of tinder-dry cotton, Solo watched the wounded man, crazed with rage and pain, set flame to waste from a cigarette lighter.

Solo held his breath. It was time to move. Gripping his fist closed as if holding a friction bomb poised to hurl, he lunged out from beneath the cotton bale, directly in the path of the pain-crazed hoodlum.

The man toppled back and screamed like a woman. He had learned twice, the hard way, about friction bombs.

His terrorized screams halted his pals for a split second. The frightened man forgot to hurl the fiery waste. The flames seared his hands. He cried out again.

He released the waste and the flames flickered, falling along his arms and inside his coat.

Solo kept moving. He struck the man hard, carrying him down and along the heated planks.

He rolled over quickly, putting the yelling man between him and the other two gunmen.

Before the frightened man could recover his wits in any part, Solo drove his extended fingers into his Adam's apple. Solo's other hand was ripping the gun from the hood's relaxing grasp.

Solo fired upward, with the dead weight of the hoodlum as his shield.

A shoe caught his wrist and the gun flew from his hand. He heard it rattling along the planks. At the same instant he heard, rather than felt, a shoe driven into his face.

They were on him then. The burned man was jerked away from him, and they worked him over smoothly and professionally. They ripped away his glasses, tore off his jacket. They pulled off his shoes and dragged him across the wharf to the water.

Distantly, Solo heard a man's shouting. It was unreal. It was as if someone called his name from some remote place—

His head bumped across the planks, but there was no place for new pain in his body; all agony trunk lines were overloaded; new messages had to wait.

He heard the shouting growing closer. He heard the two men swearing. One of them said savagely, "Let's get out of here!"

Solo's head banged the thick planking at the edge of the wharf and for a moment he hung over the side. The water glittered impossibly far, brighter than the sun and as distant.

Then he was being pulled back to the dock, and he recognized the voice of Carrero, his guide.

Solo stretched his eyes wide, trying to see Carrero's face, but all he could see was the blinding red ball of the sun.

Carrero's voice was quavering with concern. "I came looking for you, Senor. I worried. I thought you would not look right without your butterfly net. I went out and found it for you."

Solo grinned, whispering it. "What you did, was, you saved my life, old friend."

He tried to smile, but knew his face was a bloodied, hideous caricature of smiling.

FIVE

IN THE pressurized Pan-American jet cabin at thirty thousand feet, Napoleon Solo sweated.

He heard people chatting calmly around him. A stewardess tried to engage him in conversation, but he was in too much discomfort to think casually.

He went back over all he had seen, and had not seen, what he'd found and failed to find in that jungle.

He was still kicking it around in his mind when the plane set down at Kennedy airport. He passed through customs, came out on the concourse and hailed a taxi.

The cab driver had just missed making a killing in the market. He told Solo all about it on the ride into Manhattan. He was still explaining the details when Napoleon Solo stepped out of the cab in the east forties.

He walked toward the gleaming structure of the United Nations Building which dominated the neighborhood.

Going down a flight of steps, Solo entered Del Floria's Cleaning' and Tailoring shop, an unprepossessing establishment in the basement of an ordinary-appearing whitestone building in the middle of a long block.

At the rear of the shop, Solo passed through a curtained dressing room; soon he entered the charged atmosphere of United Network Command for Law and Enforcement headquarters.

It was a gleaming place of chrome and steel where men and women moved swiftly.

The building itself quivered with the electronic feelers that reached out from roof and under ground to the farthest crannies of the earth, continuously sending and receiving messages by every known method from carrier pigeon to the highest-secret sound-by-light apparatus.

At the admissions desk the young receptionist pinned an identification tag to Solo's lapel. This tag would be scanned and read and approved by concealed electric eyes every few feet throughout the labyrinth of corridors.

Solo had gone only a few steps when lovely April Dancer came hurrying from one of the many elevators. "Solo." She touched his arm, wincing slightly at the sight of his bruised face. "What did you learn about Don?"

"I'm afraid he's dead," Solo said.

"You look as if you'd met his enemies. I hope they look even worse than you do."

"Afraid it was THRUSH's inning this time, April. But at least I know they were there, even if I don't why, or where they got to."

"You look ready to fall on your face."

Napoleon Solo tried to smile. "Nothing that a little loving care wouldn't improve. How about dinner after I report to Waverly?"

"Afraid I wouldn't be very good company," April said. "Just can't get my mind on pleasure—this dreadful business we're in."

Solo smiled at her. "Man does not live by dread alone, April."

April squeezed his arm. "Why don't you see me after you've talked with Alexander?"

Solo hadn't realized he was still smiling faintly when he faced Alexander Waverly in the Command Room until the chief demanded testily, "What do

you find to smile about in a battered face like that?"

Solo wiped away the smile. "No, sir," he agreed. "There's nothing to smile about."

He made a full report of his arrival in San Miguel, his trek into the jungle. "At first I thought the whole thing was insane. There was absolutely no trace of this laboratory that Sayres described in such detail. In fact, the jungle in that spot looked exactly like all the swamp around it."

"Impossible."

"That's what I thought. But I was able to find the general outline of where the lab had stood—less than a week before!"

"Plant life grows lushly in the tropics, Solo," Waverly said. "But nothing like this."

"Nothing like this," Solo agreed. "Plants, vines, trees growing, full height, where a lab had stood a few days earlier. There is some kind of artificial stimulation of growth here, and as far as I can see, this must be behind whatever project THRUSH is working on."

"You're convinced THRUSH is behind this?"

Solo touched gingerly at his bruised face. "Physically I am convinced, sir. THRUSH—or somebody—left three guards at the port shipping warehouse to be sure nobody pried into the shipment of plants and equipment."

"Obviously you pried," Waverly said with a faint smile.

"I have the scars to prove it," Solo said. "But I also have an address. Big Belt, Montana. I could barely locate it on any map. A village in the Big Belt Mountain ranges."

Waverly stood up, smiling crookedly. "I am proud of you, Solo. And I don't often say this to my men. I don't like to spoil them."

"I didn't find out how Sayres and Diego Viero were killed," Solo said. "But somehow, all traces of their body, clothing and equipment were destroyed, as if by some kind of intense heat."

Waverly nodded. "You'll want to be most cautious then."

"Sir?"

"When you arrive in the Big Belt Mountains. Our computers showed an area of disturbance up there. We dispatched Mr. Kuryakin to investigate a short time ago. You will join him at once via jet and copter."

Solo opened his battered mouth to protest—he could barely walk and he was looking forward to a hot shower and a date with April Dancer, in that order—but he was too tired to make the effort. Mr. Waverly was like the umpire in a baseball game. You couldn't win, disputing one of his decisions anyhow.

SIX

ILLYA KURYAKIN stepped off the Greyhound bus into the flat village silence of Big Belt, Montana.

"You're sure this is the place?" he said doubtfully to the driver.

The driver grinned at him. "Leave the driving to us."

"Your driving was all right. I'm worried about your sense of direction," Illya said. He stared along the single hard packed main street, the dusty trees, the aged, wind abraded buildings.

Inside the cafe-bus station, Illya inquired about the four-wheel jeep that had been ordered for him.

The clerk behind the desk didn't even bother looking up. "Afraid that jeep's not ready, sir."

"But we ordered it ready and waiting!" Illya said, annoyed by the villager's apathy.

The clerk shrugged. "Like I said, I'm sorry, mister."

Illya counted a slow ten. He managed a smile. "Where is the jeep?"

"Round the corner there at Mapes' Garage. You can't miss it."

Illya grinned. You couldn't miss anything in this town.

The bus was gone and there were only a few people lounging along Main Street when Illya stepped out on the walk.

He turned right, going past a grocery store, a dress shop toward a bar and the side street.

The gun that fired was not silenced. The rifle cracked and instinctively Illya toppled forward. The bullet sang waspishly past his head.

Illya crawled forward, then sprawled behind the questionable concealment of a rain barrel.

He did not move for a moment. He tried to make sense in his being ambushed. Friendly little town. No wonder U.N.C.L.E.'s computers kept spewing out reports of turbulence in the area, mysterious influx of strangers, sudden unexplained activity.

Cautiously, Illya edged his unruly blond head around the barrel. He stared across the street. A two-storied brick hotel, a window open, a curtain riffing in the breeze. The shot had come from that window, all right.

He waited another few seconds. The rifle barrel did not reappear in that window.

People ran out of stores, and at the hotel men and women were shouting.

Illya leaped up from behind the rain barrel, taking advantage of the excitement and people milling in the streets.

He almost bowled over a stout man in straw hat and smudged butcher's apron outside the grocery. The man yelled involuntarily.

"Charming little town," Illya said to him, bowing as he hurried past.
"Charming. Loud, though."

The greasy mechanic at Mapes' garage had run halfway down the block as Illya rounded the corner.

"What's the excitement?" the man called to Illya.

Illya forced himself to walk slowly, speak casually. "Tire blew out."

"That a fact?" The mechanic's face showed disappointment. "Could have sworn it was a deer rifle. Thought I knowed a deer rifle for sure. You positive it was a tire?" He fell in beside Illya and walked back to the littered garage-filling station with him.

Illya gazed in sick disbelief at the jeep parked on the garage ramp. The four tires were pancaked flat, the hood was up and he saw the wiring had been ripped loose.

The mechanic said, "You the fellow ordered this jeep? It was ready. Last night I checked it out myself. It was all ready for you. But this morning, when I got here, I found it just like this."

"My grandmother always said never waste time crying over spilt milk," Illya said. "Let's get to work."

"Your grandmother live around here?" the mechanic asked.

"Why?" Illya bent over the engine.

"Lots of folks have that saying around here. I never really knowed what it meant."

"You repair the tires," Illya said, "I'll get these wires back together."

In less than half an hour the tires were fixed and Illya had the jeep engine purring.

"Never heard that car running so sweet," the mechanic said admiringly. He smiled at Illya. "Say, you ever want a job as a mechanic, you got one with me."

"I'll remember that," Illya promised. He swung into the jeep.

"You going up in the Big Belts prospecting, mister?" the mechanic shouted.

"Why?"

"Lots of men up there prospecting lately. Never have seen so much action going on."

"Not me," Illya assured him with a bland smile. "I'm just looking for the place where the deer and the antelope play."

A few miles outside the settlement the hard-packed road ended. An ill-defined trail led upward toward the foothills and the raw brown mountains rearing above them.

The car rattled as if the rocks would shake it to pieces. Illya clung to the wheel, bouncing on the hard seat.

He frowned, hearing distant thunder.

He checked the sky, finding it cloudless, sun-struck. But the thunder rumbled closer.

Illya turned, staring across his shoulder. His eyes widened. The noise was not thunder. From the foothills south of him a Cessna four-seater raced toward him.

He tried to tell himself that cattlemen and coyote hunters used small planes up here. But in less than two minutes, Illya admitted that the Cessna was zeroing in on him.

The plane banked, losing altitude. Watching it, Illya almost drove headlong into a boulder.

He jerked the car back onto the trail at the moment someone in the Cessna opened fire with a repeating rifle.

Illya yelled, clinging to the wheel. This attack was senseless. But it occurred to him that the attack from the hotel window in Big Belt village hadn't made a lot of sense, either.

Illya stepped down hard on the gas.

The plane zoomed down, hawk-like, in pursuit. Bullets battered the little car, windshield shattering.

Holding his breath, Illya watched the plane climb slightly as it passed.

He looked about for concealment, but there was none except boulders and stunted trees. He stepped harder on the gas, climbing toward a distant hammock of pines.

He wasn't going to make it. He watched the plane bank daringly and turn at a few hundred feet, maneuvering with maniacal skill.

The plane returned, coming directly down and toward him.

Illya leaned forward into the protection of the dash. He whipped the jeep off the trail into a cluster of boulders.

Rifle bullets ricocheted off the hood and black holes pocked the shatter-webbed windshield.

Kuryakin swore. The boulders slowed him, but didn't impede the plane at all.

"Doesn't make sense letting them drive me out into these rocks," Illya said aloud.

He quickly whipped the little jeep back toward the trail. He cut across country, heading toward the pine hammock on the ridge.

The plane banked, making a steep turn. The roar of the plane engine was louder than the rattling of the jeep.

Suddenly Illya smelled gas. Nobody had to point out to him that the rifleman had scored a hit on the gas tank.

A tire whistled and the car listed, bumping frantically down slope. Another tire went and Illya lost control in the shale and rock outcroppings.

The plane had reached a turn. It climbed slightly and peeled off, returning.

Raging, talking to himself and sweat-wet, Illya slammed on brakes so hard the jeep side- slipped.

Catching up his overnight kit, Illya plunged from the car, striking hard on his knees. He felt the cuts of the sharp rocks, but had no time to submit to pain.

He thrust himself hard into the shadow of the boulder. He heard bullets rattling off the jeep, the shatter of glass, the scream of engine and fuselage as the plane passed less than a hundred feet above him.

He opened the bag, inching around the boulder. He watched the banking plane, saw it skid along the wind, making its turn for another pass.

He drew his U.N.C.L.E. special from the bag and socked an extension barrel on it, flipped up the telescopic sights.

Above him and directly before him the Cessna faltered as if pilot and gunman were seeking him in the rocks, trying for a final and fatal pass.

The plane moved swiftly. It nosed toward him again, the rifle spitting red.

Pressed against the boulder, Illya coldly set the special, sighted through the telescopic glass. A section of the plane was magnified for him, brought inches before his face.

Around him shale and rock chips flew as the bullets clipped them from the approaching plane.

Illya Kuryakin held his breath and pressed the trigger.

He shot only once. He sagged against the boulder then and waited.

For a long time it was as if nothing happened, as though he'd missed. He knew better.

The sleek plane flicked past, its shadow slapping at him and for a brief instant shutting away the sun.

Slowly, Illya turned, watching the plane. It fled outward as if one with the wind. It banked, started an Immelmann, and then it was as if the string ran out.

The Cessna stopped, suddenly, as if it had struck an invisible wall. It faltered, wavered, went out of control. Nosing over, it plunged toward the earth far out in the rocky hillside.

Illya remained unmoving watching it. It was already burning before it struck the rocks. It landed with a wild explosion that rocked the hillside like a mild quake.

Illya sagged against the rocks, and put his blond head back.

His face was expressionless as he stared upward into the infinite blue.

After a moment he lifted his head and gazed out there where the remains of the plane and the land around it for a radius of fifty feet still burned.

He got up, slowly, dismounting his gun and replacing it in his over night bag.

He inspected the gun-battered jeep. The job they'd done on it was thorough. The windshield was webbed, gray and opaque. Two tires were flat. Gas leaked to the ground. Even if he could make it run, it wouldn't go far.

He stood up, shoulders sagged round. He turned tiredly, inspecting the hills, the flat graze land, the wild mountains and the ranges lost in the blue haze. And this was when he heard the drone of another plane motor.

A shudder racked his body.

He was too tired to feel fear, or even rage. He toppled against the jeep, staring into the bleached sky.

It came racing toward him. The motor was different and he recognized that it was a helicopter. It could still chase him like a fox through this rocky country.

"Somebody's trying to tell me something," he said. He sighed and opened the overnight bag again. He'd have to have his answer ready. They were persistent.

But he was stubborn.

ACT II—THE SUMMONS TO DEATH

ILLYA KURYAKIN slapped the Special together again and snapped the telescopic sight into place.

He straightened then, standing braced with his legs apart. Around him the rocks glinted back at the sun and his damaged jeep leaked its gasoline into the sand.

The copter engine rattled and reverberated in the rocks, drowning out everything except the rage that gorged up in Kuryakin.

He tightened his grip on the gun, ready to slap it into place against his shoulder for a steady brace.

"Go ahead! Start it!" Illya raged, his voice lost and puny in the thunder of the chopper motors.

He shook his fist. The helicopter circled him. It whipped around him as if battering at him with its shadow. Then it side-slipped, flying out over the burned Cessna.

Gun ready, Illya awaited the first move from the men he could see in the plastic bubble.

The chopper returned to the rocks where Illya waited in impotent rage for the first attack. Suddenly it climbed, going almost vertically above him.

"Come back and fight, you finks!" Illya raged, shaking his weapon at the climbing copter.

The chopper continued upward, its engines quieting in the distance.

Illya didn't relax because it was going straight up, not leaving.

Suddenly the sun glinted as a plastic door was opened up there. A man hung balanced for a moment and then plunged suddenly outward.

Illya held the gun forgotten in his arms, watching. The jumper tumbled, one, two, three.

Suddenly parachute ropes popped free from the falling figure. The brilliantly colored chute budded and then blossomed like an air plant.

The figure dangled on the end of its strings and then floated toward Illya in the rocks.

Illya exhaled expansively, recognizing Napoleon Solo, even in the distance, even in a jump suit.

Solo struck the shale outcropping hard and was bobbed along like a cork for a few seconds before the chute deflated.

Illya remained where he was in the rocks. Solo unfastened the chute, loosened the bulky jump suit and walked toward Illya, pushing his dark hair back from his face.

Illya flinched slightly at the sight of Solo's battered face. He looked as if he'd gone a few rounds with a meat grinder.

But Solo grinned, bowing slightly. "Howdy, partner. They sent me looking for you."

Illya Kuryakin remained tense, holding the light gun across his chest.

Solo laughed. "What's the matter? Don't you trust anybody anymore?"

Illya exhaled and lowered the Special. He said, still raging, "I'd tell you just some of the violent things that have happened to me since I arrived in Big Belt this morning, but I can see by the condition of your face that you don't really care."

Solo nodded, touching gingerly at his bruised face with the back of his hand. "Right. You don't tell me your woes, I won't tell you mine."

Illya nodded in agreement and sagged against a boulder.

Solo strode past him, going toward the jeep.

"Where you going?" Illya asked mildly.

"Come on. Let's get out of here."

Illya shook his head. "Not in the jeep. That's one of my woes that I won't tell you about."

TWO

IT WAS late afternoon.

Footsore, sweated and thirsty, Solo and Kuryakin climbed an escarpment in the east range of the Big Belt mountains.

They stood on the brown rock ledge. All man's evil for that instant seemed dwarfed by the purpled majesty of the late afternoon mountain ranges. The peaks jutted upward toward the darkening sky, and beyond them higher peaks, capped with snow were yellow and ash gray far in the distance.

"One thing wrong with the world," Solo mused. "People."

Illya nodded. "Funny. Greedy men won't stop long enough to look around and see what they've got."

"Well, because they won't, we've got to get to work," Solo said. He unpacked the kit he'd carried strapped to his back, setting up a range-scanner like the one he'd used in the tropics.

When the instrument was set up, he said across his shoulder, "Just better warn you, Don Sayres was using one of these things when he was killed—mysteriously, instantly."

Illya shrugged. "One way is like another."

"Pleased you feel that way."

Illya sank to a small boulder. He removed his dust-caked shoes. "Right now I feel nothing but tired and hungry. Let's find out what's going on and get out of here."

Solo nodded in silent assent. He worked some moments in silence and deep concentration.

Suddenly Napoleon Solo whistled.

Illya got up from the rock in his bare feet. Napoleon Solo moved aside.

Illya studied the pictures jumping darkly on the six-inch dial face, or screen, a scene picked up as sound and transmitted as light, reproduced as photographs through any obstructions, even mountains.

Illya was silent a long time. At last he shook his head, "I see it. But I don't believe it. Tropical plants don't grow in Montana."

"I believe it," Solo said. "I know where those plants came from."

"What's the point of growing tropical plants in this part of the world?"

"There's a point to it, all right. Those plants are growing even larger and greener and wilder than they did down in that damned rain forest."

Illya shook his head. "What's the exact distance and range reading?"

Solo checked the readings. "Four miles, due west."

"That could be a long walk."

"Yes. That four miles is as the scanner and the crow flies."

Illya Kuryakin pushed his feet back into his shoes. "Much as I don't want to, we've got to get closer. We've got to get in there."

Solo checked the flickering pictures reproduced on the tiny screen another few moments. Illya Kuryakin sank to the rock and tied his shoes.

They both heard the noise from the rocks behind them at the same instant.

They moved as one man. Illya came up from the rock and Solo spun around, .38 U.N.C.L.E. Special drawn.

They stared down the barrel of a waiting rifle.

Tense, they gazed at the girl holding that gun. The first thing they saw was that she was extraordinarily beautifully, unspeakably frightened.

She trembled, barely able to hold the rifle fixed on them. This made her triply dangerous because her finger on the trigger quavered, too.

Her voice shook. "Don't move, either one of you, or I'll kill you."

Solo gave the quivering girl his blandest smile. "I wasn't planning any move."

"Nor me," Illya said. "Matter of fact, we were just sitting here, waiting for you to come along."

"Go ahead. Laugh," the girl said on the verge of tears. "I hope you can laugh as easily with a bullet in you."

"That's the hard way, all right," Solo agreed.

THREE

"WHO ARE YOU?" Napoleon Solo kept his voice level, afraid any undue excitement might drive her into hysterical use of that gun. Her voice slashed at him, quavering, but the rage riding it. "Never mind that. I'll ask the questions."

Napoleon Solo watched the girl narrowly. "You don't act like a professional with that gun, but THRUSH has used more obvious gimmicks."

"THRUSH?" The girl scowled.

"That's right," Illya Kuryakin said. "Are you from THRUSH?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," the girl said, hysteria mounting behind her voice again.

"She thinks THRUSH is a bird," Illya said.

"Make your jokes," the girl said savagely, tilting the mouth of the rifle. Even with the gun in her hands there was a breathtaking loveliness about her. Not even the functional clothes she wore could truly detract from her eye-widening beauty.

Her hour-before-dawn black hair was brushed back carelessly from her face and toppled in lustrous waves almost to her shoulders. She wore Levis, denim shirt and scuffed boots as if they were the latest from the House of Dior. She looked to be somewhere between eighteen and twenty. "Death is no joke to me."

"You misunderstand," Illya said. "Would you want to see grown men cry?"

"My father cried," she said in that savage tone. "You people made him cry."

"Wait a minute! This is a case of mistaken identity," Illya began.

Her quavering voice rang out. "You stay where you are."

She jerked the gun up, her finger trembling on the trigger.

"Hang cool, miss," Solo advised. "You got a hate on, but we haven't earned it yet."

"That's right," Illya said. "If you shoot us for something that happened to your father, you've got the wrong men."

She stared at them, her lovely face gray. Her lips were perfectly formed, even without lip rouge. Her eyes were the color of violets, and her gaze wavered between them for a moment.

Suddenly she burst into tears, crying violently. She sobbed, standing shoulders round, the gun dangling at her side. Tears streaked across her cheeks, but she did not even lift her hand to her face.

It was as if she were too tired to raise her fingers.

Solo went slowly forward and gently removed the rifle from her arms.

She did not protest. It was as if she were relieved to be rid of it.

Solo started the fire in the gas cooker outside the girl's car, camped six miles down the west side of the mountain. The car was parked hidden in a copse of pine between a narrow trail and a mountain brook.

He put on the coffee and when it was ready, carried the girl a steaming cup. She took it, her hands trembling.

Illya and Solo sat near her, drinking coffee in the gathering dark.

The girl held the cup in both hands. She seemed depleted, finished.

Solo said gently, "Why don't you tell us about it? Who are you looking for?"

"That's it." Her chin tilted. "I don't know. I could have killed both of you—and been wrong. I know that now. I've been half out of my mind since my father disappeared."

"That's a good place to begin," Solo said. "Tell us about your father, how he disappeared."

"He disappeared last night," the girl said. "But that wasn't the beginning of it. I don't know where it began, really. Everything's been so strange for the past year... My father was an associate professor of biology at Northwestern —"

"Under Professor Ivey Nesbitt," Illya finished for her, as if thinking aloud.

She stared at them, caught between astonishment and suspicion. "How did you know that?"

Solo said, "We've been looking for Dr. Nesbitt. For a long time."

She frowned, staring at the steam rising from her coffee. "Well then, you know that Dr. Nesbitt simply disappeared from the school. No one heard anything from him."

"But your father came out here to Montana looking for Dr. Nesbitt," Solo prompted.

"Yes. He took a leave from the school this summer, I came along with him. I'm a secretary in a publishing office, but I gave up my job. I was worried about my father, and didn't want him traveling alone."

"Do you know why he came here to the Big Belt Mountains?"

"You're sure he never got any word from Dr. Nesbitt?"

"Of course I'm sure." Her voice rose slightly. "I would have known. He would have told me. No. It was a hunch he had. He said he and Dr. Nesbitt had done some biology experiments out in these ranges once years before. He had no other place to look, and so he came here, perhaps in desperation."

"Perhaps," Solo agreed. "Except that we're pretty sure that if Dr. Nesbitt is still alive he is some where in these mountains."

"Well, my father didn't know that, not for sure. He would have told me."

"Do you think he could have met Dr. Nesbitt somewhere and simply have gone away with him?"

"And left me? Why should he do that?"

"I don't know. Sometimes scientists do strange things."

"Not my father. The strange things were done to him."

"What strange things?" Illya prompted her.

She held her breath a moment. She stared upward, past the dark trees toward the star-silvered sky. They gazed at the perfection of her classic profile. She said, "The strangest of all was the summons to death that he got —"

"Summons to death?" Solo asked.

"Oh, I know it sounds incredible." She looked from Illya to Solo. "We were in the hotel at Big Belt. It was night. Father had been alone, riding through these mountains on horseback. He was tired. But he was troubled. Something was on his mind. Three or four times he looked as if he were going to tell me about it.

"Then suddenly a man walked into the lobby of the hotel where we were sitting. He walked across the room directly to us. He stared straight ahead. It was as if his eyes did not focus, as if he had no idea where he was, or

what he was saying. It was as if he were in some mind-numbing trance, following orders, speaking words he'd been programmed to speak.

"He said to my father, 'Are you Professor Samuel Connors?'"

She exhaled, watching them narrowly, knowing they would have trouble believing what she'd say next. "Then he handed my father this summons to death."

Solo whistled slightly. "You'll have to tell me more about that summons."

"Oh, I know you'll find it as hard to believe as I did—harder because at least I saw it, I know it existed."

"What did it look like?" Illya asked.

"A perfectly legal looking document. Like any summons to court, a subpoena. Only it was to no court I ever heard of, and the wording was so strange, accusing my father of a capital crime. I thought it was a joke. But my father didn't. He became very upset. He went up to his room, and later I heard him in there alone, and he was crying."

"Where was the court to be held? What was its name?"

She frowned, remembering. "It didn't make sense. It was called the seating of The Highest Referendary of Unquestioned Supreme Hearings. A jumble of words."

"Not quite," Solo said. "A jumble, all right. T-H-R-U-S-H. It makes that much sense."

"Sure. THRUSH's own Supreme Court, where they dispense their own brand of international law."

"They accused my father of crimes against them, crimes which were to be detailed at his trial, and before his execution. All this was in the summons."

"One thing emerges clearly from all this," Solo said. "Your father may not have found his friend Nesbitt, but he got so close to something or

somebody, that THRUSH couldn't afford to permit him to live."

"But he didn't even know what they were accusing him of. I tried to talk him out of it, but he took it with deadly seriousness—and hardly knew I was there. But he kept saying he didn't know what he had done."

"That does make sense," Solo said, "even if it sounds wild to you. Perhaps he came near to some thing, nearer than he realized at that time, or saw something that was without meaning for him at that moment, but which THRUSH was afraid might become clear to him once he gave it some thought."

"Who are you?" the girl said, "that you know so much about this organization that calls itself THRUSH?"

"Well, we're no friends of theirs," Illya said. "We can safely tell you that much." He smiled at her. "Why don't you tell us now who you are?"

"I told you. I'm Professor Connor's daughter, his only child. My mother has been dead for three years. The name that everybody calls me sounds so frivolous here, when my father is missing, and may be dead. But my father started it years ago. He said one day that bikinis were made for me, or that I was made for them." Her face flushed beautifully. "And the nickname, Bikini, has stuck ever since."

"Bikini?" Illya said. He smiled. "Believe me, it fits you—like a bikini."

FOUR

SOLO AND ILLYA sat for a long time outside the car-trailer after the exhausted Bikini had gone into bed.

She had handed out sleeping bags.

"I know you're on some vital mission," she said. "But please stay here tonight. Whatever it is will wait for morning."

Solo and Illya talked in whispers.

Illya said, "A frightened girl."

"On the brink of hysteria," Solo agreed. "She shouldn't be out here alone."

"There remains that lab over there, and the night may be the best time to sneak in there," Illya said. "She's a lovely doll, and she's got a big problem, but we came out here looking for THRUSH and Dr. Nesbitt."

Solo checked his wrist watch.

"Why don't we hit the sack for three or four hours? By that time she'll be deep asleep. We'll clear out then."

Illya nodded, yawning. "I could use the sack time."

"I'm too tired to ache even in the places that hurt," Solo said.

He fell asleep almost at once when he pushed down into the sleeping bag. Night winds riffled the tall pines, and the air was fresh, heavy, making him sleepier than ever. He dreamed he was wrestling an alligator, knowing he had to keep the animal on its back, or die. He struggled, but the saurian was too strong, and he was thrown over and he was being held down, but it was not an alligator holding him helpless, it was a girl.

She was shaking him, whispering his name over and over. "Mr. Solo. Please, Mr. Solo, wake up."

Solo struggled up from the depths of sleep with anguished reluctance.

He sat up, seeing Bikini bending over him in the darkness. She wore pajamas and a robe, and not even this combination could defeat her dream-stirring beauty.

He checked his wrist watch, and almost moaned. He had been asleep for fifteen minutes. A few feet away Illya breathed deeply and regularly, completely exhausted and sound asleep.

"Yes," he whispered. "What is it."

"I couldn't sleep."

He moaned. "Is that what you woke me up to tell me?"

She stayed on her knees, close beside him. "I know you are planning to leave during the night."

Solo winced. "Important business, Bikini."

"I know. But that's why I can't sleep. I'm going with you."

"You can't do that."

"I've got to. It's my only chance of finding my father. I know you're not looking for my father, but you may find him, along with whatever else you find. I want to be there."

"We'll bring him back to you if we can."

"I don't want you to leave me. Before I met you I wasn't scared; maybe I was too numb to be frightened. But now I realize the terrible danger in this place."

"Get in your car. Get out of here. If we find Dr. Connors we'll get word to you."

"I've no place to go without my father."

"Still, we can't take you with us."

"If you don't I'll follow you. I've got to find my father."

"Bikini, I don't know what kind of danger lies over there—"

"I've learned tonight that danger is all around here, in every direction. Please. Take me with you. I won't make any trouble—"

"That's what Eve must have said." Solo sighed heavily under the witchery of Bikini's sudden smile. "Get so sleep. You in on the party."

FIVE

ONCE THEY were in the dry canyon, locating the strange laboratory was no problem. Lights shielded from view by the high rising narrow ledge a thousand feet from the gorge sump, the building illumined the twisting dead riverbed for miles in both directions.

"We can't talk any more," Solo warned Illya and Bikini before they entered the mouth of the canyon. "They may be able to pick up my whispering from here. We know they were monitoring Don Sayres long before he came near them in the jungle."

"Maybe I should come in from the other end," Illya said. "That way one of us would have a surer chance of making it."

"Dark is running out," Solo said. "It'll be a tough trek to the other end of the canyon."

"It's worth a try."

Solo nodded. "Take Bikini with you."

"Illya laughs," Illya said. "If you're smart, you'll send her back. If she's smart, she'll go."

Solo shrugged. "We'll try to get in from here. Good luck."

Illya nodded and bounded up the steep ledge like a mountain goat. Solo watched him a moment; then he nodded at Bikini. "Stay close behind me."

She caught his belt in her fingers and he moved into the mouth of the canyon. Inside these rocks they were attacked by an incessant buzzing sound. Smile, Solo thought, you're on candid radar.

There was no sense turning back. He kept as close to the rocky wall as possible, slithering forward in the darkness. The buzzing sound grew louder. Far ahead he saw the brighter illumination of the lab around the sharp twists in the dry river bed.

The new sound was like a fist striking against a hand, swiftly, repeatedly.

Solo paused, listening. Bikini pressed close against his back.

He recognized the sound; it was that of men running in some sort of padded shoes.

Two armed guards came running around a sharp bend. They wore green fatigues, green caps with small, brilliant lights attached above the visors. The lights played across the ground ahead of them, illuminating the narrow canyon floor and the mountain walls.

Solo pressed hard against the rocks, pressing Bikini behind him.

The first guard ran past, his light touching at their feet until he was almost past. Then the glow illumined their faces.

The first guard didn't see them, but the second did. The first continued running.

As the second guard stopped, bringing up his gun, Solo chopped with the side of his hand across the man's throat. The guard slumped with a faint outcry.

It was enough to stop the man ahead. He turned around, his light raking across Bikini's stricken face.

Solo caught up the fallen guard's gun in one hand and threw it at the man running toward him.

The gun caught the guard across the chest, slowing him. Solo sprang toward him, tackling him and carrying him down to the ground under him.

The guard lost his hat. It fell to the ground and as the man rose, Solo saw his eyes were flat, did not focus, the face expressionless.

He remembered Bikini's saying that the man who had delivered the "summons to death" to her father had looked like a mindless robot.

Mindless or not, the man had been programmed to fight furiously and to kill.

He brought his knee up, sending Solo sprawling beyond him.

Then he stalked Napoleon, gun hefted like a club.

Solo retreated, going into a side turn off the main artery of the canyon. This seemed to be what the guard wanted. He lunged at Solo, swung the rifle, and Napoleon Solo leaped back into the darkness to safety.

He swung again and Solo backed away again. Suddenly though, instinct and the abrupt chill cry of wind warned Solo that he was being driven toward a brink.

Solo flung himself against a boulder, stayed there, timing himself. The guard swung the rifle. At the last instant Solo ducked and the rifle smashed.

Solo sprang upward, catching the guard around the knees, taking him down. They fought on the floor of the narrow gorge, rolling almost to the edge.

Solo caught his breath. The pit yawned, bottomless, narrow, a fault in the rocks. A man's body would stay there forever.

The guard's cold hands closed on Solo's throat. Solo's head hung out over the chasm.

Solo set himself, trying to lever the guard over his head. It was impossible, the silent man was possessed of superhuman strength.

Solo forgot trying to throw the man and concentrated upon staying alive.

Those hands tightened. Solo felt the canyon and the sky changing places. Red stars wheeled and skidded before him.

He swung his legs up as high as he could, caught his shoe. The fingers closed on his throat. He felt consciousness slipping away, felt his body being pressed closer to the precipice edge.

He slipped the shoe off, gripping it with all his strength. He struck the guard across the nose with it. He did it again and again.

Nothing changed. In horror he began to be afraid that the man was incapable of feeling pain. The fingers closed and he felt the last oxygen burning in his lungs.

In desperation because there was nothing else to do, Solo kept striking the guard across the nose, knowing each time he struck the blows were weaker.

Suddenly the guard whimpered, as if the battering had broken whatever mind-binding spell he was under. The hands loosened. Solo didn't delay hoping for more. Gasping in a deep, sobbing breath, he fought upward, rolling over with the guard, pulling himself back to safety.

The guard went on fighting, striking, choking, pounding. But there was a difference and Solo felt it. Now he was fighting an ordinary man of ordinary strength, no longer driven by some outside will.

Solo's fist caught the guard on the jaw. The guard slumped, then grabbed Solo's body, rolling with him toward the side of the bottomless chasm.

Solo fought wildly, realizing that the guard had been programmed to kill, even if he died, too. This much remained to drive him.

Solo caught at the jutting rocks, fighting free of the guard's grasp. He thrust the heel of his hand against the man's jaw and thrust with all his strength.

The guard loosened his grip on Solo, gasping. Then Solo thrust out one more time and the guard fell away, slipping in terrible slow motion over the side of the cliff. His fingers grasped at jutting rocks, held.

Solo sank for a moment against the mountain wall, panting. He took up his shoe, stared at the man's hands gripping those rocks. Then he slipped the shoe on his foot and stood up. He exhaled heavily, speaking over the side of the cliff, "You will hang on, won't you?"

He ran around the curve in the canyon.

SIX

BIKINI WAS crouched in the shadows where he'd left her. In the light from the guard's cap he read the terror in her face. He wondered if she began to see just some of the peril into which she'd walked.

Her lips parted and she almost cried out her shock and relief at the sight of him.

He shook his head, warning her against speaking. She nodded and reached out her hand to him. Her fingers were icy.

He nodded, motioning her to follow him again. One thing he was sure of, even the lab radar would show only two of them. It was unlikely that it could reveal their identity. Two guards had come running out. Two people were returning. Perhaps they had bought a few moments of safety.

He decided to use it to the best advantage. Holding Bikini's hand tightly, he ran along the narrow gorge between the high dark canyon walls.

Suddenly the illumination was like the sun at noon. Solo paused at the turn in the rocks. Leaving Bikini pressed into the darkness, he inched forward, peered around the corner.

He caught his breath. He had seen this lab on the long-range scanner, but he'd had no idea of its immensity or complexity.

The floor of the canyon widened abruptly to a width of a hundred yards around this turn. Hundreds of feet above, the crest of the mountains closed to a few inches.

In this gorge the laboratory had been set up, and everything depended on its own artificial lighting and heating. A green haze seemed to envelope the glass walled building, but only because everywhere strange tropical plants grew lush and deeply green under this strange light. A kind of buffalo grass had sprouted wild on the bare canyon flooring under this light, growing almost to the narrowing turn.

Eyes distended, Solo remained an instant too long staring across the open space toward that glass-walled lab.

A sudden hissing alerted him. The sound ripped through the incessant buzzing which had almost become a part of the charged atmosphere.

Solo fell back behind the rock. A sharp beam of light whipped across the mouth of the open space.

Shocked, Napoleon Solo saw the buffalo grass burned gray where the beam touched it.

He stayed there for some moments, while his heart slowed to a regular beating again. Three more times the light beam reached for him, and barely missed.

He inched his way back to Bikini. She stared up at him questioningly.

Solo gazed down at Bikini for a moment, almost regretfully. She whispered. "What's the matter?"

He didn't answer. He reached out his left hand, tilting her chin slightly. Then he struck her sharply with his right, on the side of her jaw.

She slumped forward and he caught her gently.

Carrying her in his arms, he found a small break in the wall. He laid her down in the darkness, whispering, "You'll be safe here, Beautiful. Safer anyhow. Sweet dreams."

He ran back to the mouth of the canyon sump. The light beam still hissed, tilted now, no longer touching the grass as it swung out, reaching for him.

From his pack he took the small canister and sprayed it from his legs upward, covering his body with a fine mist. As he worked, the haze hardened into a flexible plastic.

After a few moments the plastic was like suiting which encased his entire body.

He waited a few seconds longer, watching that beam whip across the open. When the light passed, he stepped boldly out and ran across the opening toward the lab. The plastic was unwieldy but was flexible enough to permit movement.

Solo was within fifty feet of the lab doors when the beam raked across him.

The plastic melted and ran like teardrops. But he was only barely aware of it.

Solo staggered.

His mind fogged over. The green lights dimmed, seeming to recede into a darker canyon.

He felt as if an invisible fist struck him in the chest, barring his way, but not really hurting because it was as though he were numb.

He tried to stride forward, but his legs no longer obeyed commands from his mind.

He slumped to the ground, hearing the buzzing and the hissing louder than ever.

Gradually the green lights brightened and Napoleon Solo opened his eyes.

He was slumped upon his knees, half supported by two men, neither of whom even looked at him.

Things took shape before him. He saw that he was in a brilliantly illumined office-lab. Rows of equipment led away toward the greenhouses, where the

lush tropical plants appeared to be growing visibly, as they might when seen in time-lapse photography.

Solo shook his head, trying to clear it.

"Ah, our guest is waking up."

Solo tilted his head, gazing at the man who had spoken.

He was a tall man with a wide frame upon which the flesh hung loosely. He was turned away from Solo at first and Solo was struck by the resemblance between this man and the statues of Julius Caesar— the strong chin, the fine Roman nose, the intelligent forehead, the balding head.

Then the man in the white smock turned full face and Solo caught his breath, wincing. The scientist's face was badly disfigured, the left eye sitting in the corner of its misshapen socket, the skin mottled, rutted.

"Dr. Nesbitt," he whispered. Nesbitt fixed his glowering gaze upon Solo so intently that the young agent turned away, and then caught his breath, shocked a second time.

A few feet from him Illya Kuryakin was slumped in a chair, battered, scarcely more than half alive.

Illya gave him a faint salute. Solo whispered it. "How did you get here?"

"It was a lot easier than I thought."

"What happened to you?"

Illya shrugged. Blood showed at the corner of his mouth. "You don't tell me your woes, I won't tell you mine."

Dr. Nesbitt came around the cluttered desk where he had been working. Turning his scarred face at an angle away from Napoleon Solo, he smiled.

"So now you and your friend have found me, Mr. Solo. Are you pleased?"

Solo spoke ruefully. "This isn't exactly the way we planned it."

"I suppose not. Still, you must have known, you and your interfering spy organization—"

"We were only trying to help, sir—"

"Help? Did it occur to any of you that I might not want help? You must have learned from what happened to your agents in Central America when they came prying that we could have easily have killed you and Mr. Kuryakin."

"We couldn't let that stop us, Doctor. We still believed you might want to communicate through us with your friends in the outside world."

Nesbitt's voice slashed at him. "I have no friends in the outside world. I have only my work."

"But that's it, sir. That's what puzzled us. You turned your back on a most rewarding and selfless career—disappeared. The world was puzzled. We couldn't turn our backs on you."

"I assure you there is no puzzlement. I'm here doing what I want to do. I have my experiments. I am successful beyond my most fantastic expectations."

"Jungle plants growing in Montana," Illya said.

Nesbitt heeled around, the scarred half of his face livid. "That is only the smallest part of it. Mr. Kuryakin. Plants that are like living things, plants growing to huge trees overnight. Incredible, wonderful plants."

Solo kept his voice low. "Your friends are deeply concerned, Doctor."

"I said it once, Solo. I have no friends. None. Except here. My plants. My living, breathing plants."

Solo continued trying to appeal to Nesbitt's reason. "You do have friends. Evidently more than you know, or care to admit. You have one friend who

may have given his life searching for you."

Nesbitt straightened slightly. "Oh?"

"Sam Connors," Solo persisted. "Does the name mean anything to you?"

Nesbitt hesitated the space of a breath. He shrugged. "Connors? Once an under-professor of mine."

"At Northwestern. He thought he was a close friend."

"Well, he was wrong."

"He's disappeared. He may be dead. He was looking for you, deeply worried."

Nesbitt shrugged again. "Sorry to hear that."

"But you're not really concerned about his fate?"

Nesbitt straightened his wide, thin shoulders. "No. Not particularly. I am in no wise responsible for a misguided man like Professor Connors—"

"But he was looking for you!"

"I am very busy here. The people who are financing my experiments expect quick results. Nothing else concerns me."

"Not even the life or death of Sam Connors?"

"Nothing! I have no knowledge of Sam's death. I have no wish to kill—not even two meddlers like you—but I wish to be let alone. And I will be let alone—at whatever cost!"

Solo brought the "summons to death" which had been delivered to Sam Connors, from his pocket. The two guards were alert.

Solo handed the paper to the doctor. Nesbitt took it, scanned it calmly.

"Does it mean anything to you?" Solo persisted.

"Nothing. It looks like some one's tasteless idea of a joke."

"Whoever sent it had a deadly sense of humor."

At this instant whistles wailed throughout the laboratory. The guards leaped to attention.

A white-smocked man ran into the office from the corridor. "Dr. Nesbitt, there's a woman in the walled yard."

Swearing, Nesbitt ran from the room, following the white-smocked assistant.

A moment later an intercom blared, "All guards to the yard. At once."

The guards standing beside Solo and Kuryakin snapped to attention and ran like robots from the room.

"Mindless," Illya whispered. "They're mindless slaves."

Napoleon Solo jerked his head toward the doors opening off the office. "We've got less than two minutes. We've got to find out anything we can."

Illya nodded, agreeing. They ran toward the long hothouse beyond Nesbitt's rows of equipment.

Illya jerked open the door and they entered the room. They hesitated, staggered by the unnatural heat and humidity. It was almost impossible to breathe.

Quick scanning showed them the plants were all of one species, but there was every size from one inch to huge tubular plants with six foot leaves and twisting, snake-like branches.

The room was loud with a rustling, stirring of leaves and limbs.

"This is far enough," Solo said, gasping for breath and already sweating profusely. "Let's get out of here."

Illya nodded and heeled around. There was no handle on the inside of these doors. Illya thrust against them. They were securely locked and would not open from this side.

Solo wiped the sweat from his eyes. "Never mind. There's got to be more than one way out of here."

They saw another door far through narrowing aisles to their right. They ran toward it.

As they ran the large leaves brushed them, dripping water as hot as tears on them. The smell was sickeningly sweet, the smell of death. When they brushed one of the tentacle-like limbs, it adhered to their clothing and they had to break free.

The rustling was louder and the limbs stirred faster all through the hot-house, although there was not the slightest breeze.

"Out that door," Solo said, the horror mounting in him.

He pushed through overhanging leaves and limbs that seemed to fight back at him, almost like human arms.

He broke clear and lunged toward the door. His feet brushed something and he stumbled to his knees.

"Solo!"

Illya's voice cried out behind him, but for the moment Solo stared at the dead man on the floor.

"Connors," he whispered, shaking his head. He'd seen the photograph Bikini carried of her father, but Sam had resembled his daughter in life, and he recognized him instantly.

Connors lay twisted on the floor, limp as a sawdust doll. He looked as if he had been crushed by a boa constrictor. All the bones in his body had been smashed.

"Solo!" Illya Kuryakin yelled again.

Solo jumped up, bringing his gaze from the shattered body on the floor.

Illya had tried to follow him through the growth of jungle plants, but had not made it. A green tentacle, larger than a fire hose had constricted about his throat and head.

Illya fought at it helplessly.

Solo looked around, feeling panic, sweated and almost drowned in the now wailing rustle of the plants all around them.

He caught up a pruning shears near the door and leaped toward the plant where Illya was trapped.

He drove the shears into the soft green texture of the constricting limb. Sap spurted out, sap that was pouring pinkly, almost like very anemic human blood.

ACT III—INCIDENT OF THE KILLER PLANTS

DR. IVEY NESBITT strode along the corridor and entered his office. Neither side of his face betrayed any emotion at seeing that Illya Kuryakin and Napoleon Solo were gone.

He was immediately followed by his white-smocked assistant, a sullen, unsmiling man clearly of Indian ancestry.

At a short distance behind the assistant, two staring-eyed guards came, half-dragging Bikini Connors.

They led her into the office, deposited her in the chair in which Illya had sat. They stood at attention on each side of her then, gazing emptily ahead.

"Please, Dr. Nesbitt," Bikini begged. "Where is my father?"

At his desk, the tall scientist ignored her. He didn't look her way or appear to have heard her voice.

He glanced at the guards testily, as he might have gazed once at recalcitrant students in his class rooms. "What is the meaning of deserting your posts, letting our two prisoners run free?"

"Professor," the assistant said gently, "they don't hear you. Even if they do, they are unmoved by criticism or praise."

The doctor waved his arm. "Of course. One forgets one is dealing here with mindless animals, eh, Joe?"

"It's safest that way, Doctor," was all the Indian assistant said.

Nesbitt nodded, dismissing the subject.

Bikini spoke to him again, but it was as if he could not be reached by anyone from the outside world, from his past.

He turned his back, went to a bank of closed-circuit television screens. All glittered blackly, powered, waiting to be activated.

Nesbitt pressed buttons, opening the channel for each screen in turn, the walled yard, smaller labs, shipping areas, the hothouses, the corridors.

A hothouse camera swung across the long arena of tropical growth. Catching his breath, Nesbitt pressed a button, holding the camera in its position.

It was fixed on Solo, Kuryakin and a crushed body crumpled on the hothouse floor. The body the doctor ignored as if it did not exist for him, had never existed.

For a few moments, almost as if entranced by what he saw, Nesbitt watched Solo slashing at the huge arm of the writhing plant.

But as Napoleon Solo hacked the limb loose, the bloody sap spurting and oozing everywhere, Nesbitt's face darkened.

He pressed a button, spoke into a microphone at his side. Intercoms throughout the laboratory carried his voice. "There are two intruders in Hothouse One. Bring them to me."

Nesbitt's voice rattled through the humid greenhouse as Solo pulled Illya Kuryakin from the grasping tentacles of the plant.

For one moment Illya stared down in horror at Sam Connor's crushed body, and thought, "But for the grace of God and Solo using pruning shears, that could be me—"

All doors of the hothouse were thrust open and armed guards appeared in each of them.

Illya and Solo stepped in close to the doors as they were thrust open near them. With all their strength they slammed the doors shut behind the guards.

As the robot-men turned, both Illya and Solo lunged at them, thrusting them stumbling over Connor's body.

The men threw their arms up as they went sprawling into the tangled green plants.

Obviously following all this on his closed-circuit TV, Nesbitt shouted, his voice crackling over the intercom: "Door Six, Hot house One. Stop those men."

But Illya and Solo were already going out of the door. Solo glanced back, watching the two guards trying to fight free of the grasping limbs, the rustling growing to a keening pitch.

For that instant the incredibly long corridor was empty. It was brightly lighted with what seemed half a hundred doors along it.

Solo waved his arm in the direction of the distant white-doored exit.

They ran together.

Nesbitt's laughter sounded chilled and sardonic from the intercom speakers around them. It was nightmarish, as if laughter battered them from everywhere.

"He's watching us on TV," Illya gasped.

"Run," Solo said. He stayed close to the wall, sprinting toward that white-doored exit which seemed to recede the way it might in a bad dream.

"Run faster, gentlemen." Nesbitt's voice mocked them. "A little exercise, and then I shall stop you as I wish."

"Stay close to the wall," Solo warned Illya.

Illya nodded and sidestepped, but he was already too late.

They both heard the rising hiss. It was as if Illya had run into an invisible wall. The beam struck him and he stopped running, slowing, taking long steps and then halting as if paralyzed.

Solo leaped into the inset door nearest him as the hiss rose, approaching like an angry wasp.

The beam lashed at him and Solo put all his weight against the door, thrusting his way into it.

He toppled into a brightly lighted room and the door swung shut behind him.

He landed hard on his knees, and lifted his head slowly at the old chattering sound that over whelmed him.

His eyes widened at the sight of the set faces, the empty eyes, the meaningless chatter. The people sat at long tables suspended from the ceiling. They didn't look at each other, or at anything. They chattered, but it was less meaningful than squealing monkey noises in a tree.

Solo got to his feet, repelled and shaken by the sight of these mindless creatures.

He shook his head, retreated toward the door.

Faces turned his way, but not one pair of eyes actually focused on him. The eyes were like milky marbles and light reflected from them.

Solo wheeled around and grabbed at the door. Again there was no inside handle, and the door was locked securely.

Solo stared around helplessly. There was no other exit from this dormitory of the mindless. The only windows were set high in the walls.

Solo sagged against the door. The chattering went on, but he no longer listened.

From the intercom, Dr. Nesbitt's voice mocked him. "I expected you and Mr. Kuryakin to join our mindless ones eventually, Mr. Solo, but not so quickly. What's wrong, my dear fellow? You don't look overjoyed."

Exhaling heavily, Solo sagged against the barred door.

The voices rose chattering, excited, wildly agitated by the sound of the doctor's voice on the intercom.

Napoleon Solo did not look at them.

TWO

SOLO FELT the door shiver. He recognized the sound: an electric impulse had activated the lock. He stepped away and the padded door was shoved

open.

Two expressionless guards stepped into the room. They were armed with a gun that had a base like a small cannon, but which was obviously aluminum light. The barrel of the gun tapered to the mouth, which suddenly lighted up.

Solo toppled back, thinking they had subdued him with a portable light gun.

The chattering raged, but none of the people at the tables moved. The guards lifted Napoleon Solo, half-carrying him through the corridor toward Nesbitt's office.

There was no sign of Illya Kuryakin in the corridor. Solo felt ill, searching for him.

Strength had returned to his legs and arms by the time the guards led him inside Nesbitt's white-walled office.

Bikini jumped up and ran to him.

She pressed herself against him. Solo gritted his teeth to keep from falling under the pressure of her weight.

"Oh, Solo. He won't look at me," Bikini said. "He won't listen to me. He acts as if I don't exist."

"I don't think any of us exist for him very much, Bikini," Solo said.

"But he's known me since I was a baby. He's my godfather. He was at my house all the time."

"I don't think he cares to remember that." Solo looked up at Nesbitt behind his desk. He spoke over the top of Bikini's dark hair, "Where is Illya, Doctor?"

Nesbitt smiled blandly. "You'll join him soon enough, Mr. Solo. Need I say any more than that?"

Bikini turned, but remained in side the circle of Solo's arms. She stared up at Nesbitt. "Please, where is my father?"

Solo stared up at Nesbitt, waiting for him to answer. But Nesbitt merely shrugged.

Solo knew he owed Bikini the truth about her father. But the truth was too brutal for her at this moment.

Just now he could not bring himself to say the words, *your father is dead, Bikini*.

He stood, watching Nesbitt.

The doctor's good eye gazed at him unblinkingly, the smile set. "I'm afraid my plans for you have been altered—by your own actions. I'd hoped to be able to allow the three of you to leave this place after undergoing a series of minor treatments for the removal of recent memory."

He shook his head. "I can't do that now. I'm sorry. The risk is too great."

Solo spoke coldly to Bikini. "What Dr. Nesbitt means is that Illya and I know your father is dead, and how he was killed—and that 'memory' removal is too risky because it doesn't work, but death does."

"My father," Bikini whispered. She pressed her face hard upon Napoleon's shoulder.

He touched her hair, gently, holding her. He felt her heated tears against his shoulder. Somehow it gave the world a sense of sanity that a girl could still cry for her father in this place.

It seemed less a nightmare.

Nesbitt's voice cut across Solo's thoughts. "Death. Yes, death works. Death is useful here, too, Solo. Professor Connor's death was useful—"

"You told us you didn't know about his death," Solo raged.

Dr. Nesbitt shrugged as if reminding him that nothing could matter less than what he said to them, or to anyone from the world of his past.

"He was sentenced to death by our highest court," Nesbitt said. "There was nothing I could do except see that he was executed in the way that would be most useful to us. Yes, even death must be useful."

Solo shook his head, hearing the doctor's words, but unable to believe a man could have so far receded from any human feelings of remorse, guilt, love or regret.

Dr. Nesbitt regretted nothing except time lost from his experiments.

"I'm sure our deaths will serve you in some useful purpose," Solo said bitterly.

"When the time comes. Meantime, you and Mr. Kuryakin will work for us as mindless slaves—made mindless by *light*, Mr. Solo. And as for Miss Connors, I can use her body in my experiments with my plants—"

"Dr. Nesbitt. Ivey!" Bikini cried out, tormented. "What's happened to you? Once you loved my father and me."

"It's no good, Bikini," Scio said. "He's gone crackers—"

"You think I'm insane, Solo?" Dr. Nesbitt raged.

Solo shrugged. "I suspected it all along. I'm convinced, now that you've decided to use a body like hers as plant food—"

"Mr. Solo, I assure you that only the plants are important here. They are mutations, grown from the most ordinary jungle carnivorous species, from those pitcher plants devouring flies and insects to what you saw in that hothouse—"

"Oh, Ivey," Bikini wailed. "Once you were the most beloved man in—"

"A fool girl like that, what does she know?" Dr. Nesbitt said to Solo, still refusing to speak directly to the daughter of his old associate. "Does she

know of the horror of being stared at like a freak because of my disfigured face?"

"That's not true!" Bikini cried. "Nobody ever—"

"What does she know of the way I lived, dreading the way people cringed at the sight of my face? They wouldn't even let me work in peace until I came here.

"My plants don't cringe from me. My mindless slaves neither see nor react to my face. I don't have to watch people turn away."

"You're buried here," Solo said. "Worse than buried."

"That's where you're so wrong. Solo. Perhaps I shall yet control the world." Nesbitt looked around him now as though he wished to talk more fully about himself and his work.

"I shall set the world free by the use of light, Mr. Solo. I'm sure you've heard the theory that all light rays enter the eyes of animals and people, directly influencing the pituitary gland.

"In the same general way light radically affects the growth of plants. Scientists have exposed young rats to the rays of television rays and they die of severe brain damage within twelve days. By my own application of this theory I have made my slaves mindless.

"And I use the same X-ray light that comes from TV tubes, many times intensified. My jungle plants exposed to this X-ray light grow at phenomenal speed and to unheard of sizes.

"Light, Mr. Solo. Light to control. Light to kill. Light to grow. Everything subject to the intensity of my X-ray light. From a glow soft enough to be harmless to strength to register wildly on a Geiger counter. With light I shall control the world."

"Sure. And THRUSH lets you believe that you will. In exchange for what? For those plants which will grow and multiply and kill?"

Nesbitt smiled. "That is part of my experiment."

He shook his head and lowered his voice to that reasonable tone so characteristic of the deranged, "So you can see why I cannot permit you people to leave here—to spread the word of my work?"

THREE

ILLYA FELT himself being lifted up from the corridor floor where he'd crumpled like a bug when stunned by the light beam.

The men lifting him carried him loosely between them. They did not speak to each other, moving like robots.

Double doors swung open in the corridor walls ahead of them and Illya saw he was being carried into a room of dark chocolate walls with hundreds of small lights set under the ceiling, across it, and along the sills.

The guards placed him in an ordinary appearing chair which lighted up under his weight.

When he attempted to stand, Illya found he was helpless to move. The action of the light was like a terrible magnet holding him pinned to the chair.

There was no pain of any kind. It was simply impossible to break the pull of the light-magnets which secured him in the strange chair.

After a moment Kuryakin stopped fighting. He felt the strength return to his arms and legs. He still had a sense of being dizzy, but even this lessened after a few moments. He examined the chair as the guards backed out of the room.

The doors closed and locked, Illya supposed. He looked around, finding the room extremely dark and himself seated in the lighted chair like an illumined island.

He shifted his weight, attempted to raise his arms from the chair.

He could not move. The darkness seemed to press in upon him, and he had the eerie sense that unseen eyes probed at him from the walls.

Illya felt a desperate urge to cry out, but he did not. He wouldn't give hidden onlookers the satisfaction.

Suddenly he heard the crackling noise such as a TV tube made warming up, and a forty inch screen suddenly lightened the dark wall directly before him.

Dr. Nesbitt's scarred face appeared upon the screen. His mouth pulled into a mocking smile. He said, "Are you comfortable, Mr. Kuryakin?"

Illya did not answer.

"Quite secure, Mr. Kuryakin? By now, I'm sure you're convinced you cannot get out of that chair until I want you out of it. Eh?"

Illya waited. He hated this weird darkness. The television screen flickered, the gray shadows leaping across him, Dr. Nesbitt's strange eyes fixed upon him.

"The tests I'm about to subject you to, Mr. Kuryakin," Dr. Nesbitt said from the screen in his best lecture tone, "will be most fascinating to you, I'm sure, as long as you retain your senses."

The screen remained lighted, but Dr. Ivey Nesbitt's broken face disappeared.

"You look better like that," Illya said to the blank screen.

Illya heard the dim hum as some small motor was activated. The strip of flooring upon which his lighted chair was secured moved suddenly, sliding backward about ten feet.

The screen gradually darkened and the multicolored lights flashed on, along the ceiling and the floor. Somehow the room remained dark despite the

many lights, and then Illya supposed this was caused by the action of one set of colored lights upon another.

His eyes burned slightly so that he wanted to rub them, but he could not lift his hand to his face.

The small motor hummed again and the strips before and behind the chair slowly folded over him and locked, making a wide circle.

After a moment the motor engaged again and two sections of the flooring on each side of him locked into place, securing him and the lighted chair inside a dark drum.

The lights on the chair flared and died, leaving him in darkness. The magnetic power was cut off, but now there was nowhere to go. There was not even room enough to stand up inside the drum.

Nesbitt's voice pursued him, even here. "Pain from light, Mr. Kuryakin. Are you acquainted with the phenomenon? I assure you, you will be well versed in the subject soon. The simplest application I can give to prepare you for what's going to happen to you is that of the young children, sitting for hours two to three feet from a television set. They suffer all manner of illnesses, including emotional disturbances, all induced by the X-ray light from that tube. The larger the picture tube, the greater the voltage.

"In other words, the greater intensification of that X-ray light, the more pain induced. We use this principle, Mr. Kuryakin, but of course, for our purposes, we have greatly refined it, and find that colored lights offer a great deal more intensity, just as does a colored tv picture tube."

The voice snapped off and for a moment the silence and darkness persisted until Illya thought Nesbitt had gone away and forgotten him.

Somewhere a switch clicked, small motors hummed, and the first banks of lights flooded the drum. For a long time they remained constant, and then they alternated, colors flashing around and around the drum, faster and faster.

Illya Kuryakin sweated. For a long time he was conscious of no other reaction to the lights.

They grew brighter, the colors alternating in some crazy scheme. The effect was of a clockwise flashing of lights, until suddenly Illya felt himself and the chair following, the drum turning with the lights, but at first slowly. Illya felt slightly nauseated.

He closed his eyes tightly. He could still see the lights, still felt the drum spinning him over backwards. He pressed his hands over his eyes, and realized the chair was stationary, the drum was not moving, only the whirling lights caused the sickening sensation of spinning.

He pressed his arm over his eyes. Sweat burned into them. He cried out involuntarily.

Although he pressed his arm tightly across his eyes, he suddenly could see the flashing lights through them!

The strength of those lights had been intensified. He could not escape them. After a moment the chair seemed to tilt backwards, to tip, fall and then turn, following those flashing lights.

Illya Kuryakin gagged, sick at his stomach.

The lights whirled faster and faster. He screamed as he wheeled and skidded, spinning around and around in the immobile chair, the unmoving drum...

The lights flashed off. At least Illya Kuryakin thought they did. The sides of the drum lowered; the top pieces unlocked and folded down.

Though he was sick at his stomach, Illya's mind was clear enough to warn him to get out of that chair.

He lunged upward.

He was not quick enough. The lights flashed on, the magnetic power of the chair held him securely. The chair slid forward.

For a long time he could feel the lights still spinning inside his head. Buckets of hot water were thrown on him, followed by buckets of cold water.

A voice from somewhere told him to rest. He did not recognize the voice. There was an almost kindly timbre in it, and he thought wildly that the speaker might have human emotions, if only he could appeal to him.

But then the voice died away and he was left locked in the chair, a bright white island in the chocolate darkness.

Illya Kuryakin didn't know how long it was before he was returned to the light drum—perhaps hours, or days, or only minutes. His head ached and time had already lost meaning.

He closed his eyes against the whirling lights, but this did not help. The bright colors penetrated first his eyelids, then seemed to enter at his temples, throbbing behind his eyeballs, twanging at the taut nerves. He pressed his fists hard against his temples and then the steady beams of colored lights battered at his forehead, at the base of his skull, the crown of his head.

Illya's head ached excruciatingly now. Even when he came out of the drum, was doused with water, fed something which would not stay on his stomach, and told to rest, the headache persisted.

The human body might become accustomed to anything, even the throb of a headache if it remained constant. But the pressures, the intensity of the light was increased, lessened, speeded up.

And he spun in the drum, screaming against it, until he could not even hear his own screaming.

He could feel his nerves going.

He wanted to break down into tears, to cry over nothing.

The lights never stopped whirling for him now, even when he knew they were off and he was outside the drum. They whirled, jabbing like lances through his brain.

The kindly voice asked him what day it was, and Illya could not answer. And after a long time the gentle questioner inquired Illya's name, and Illya could not answer.

He no longer knew.

For a few brief moments when he was doused with the buckets of ice water, Illya had lucid thoughts. He knew his name. He knew why he had come to this place. He remembered the lights. He remembered the kindly voice, the way he strained, listening for it, how lost he was when it went away and left him in the darkness.

Then the hot water would strike him and the lights would whirl.

In his lucid moments he warned himself his mind was going, his nerves already frayed, his emotions damaged. He had to cling to some thought that had nothing to do with this place. As the cold water struck him, he remembered New York, the restaurants, the Village, the subways, the sun on the United Nations complex early in the morning.

He gritted his teeth, swearing to hold these thoughts, to shut out what was happening to him.

The hot water washed it away.

He'd long since lost count of how many times he had been placed inside the drum. He never escaped the lights except for the briefest moments. The ice water no longer felt cold. Now there was no difference between hot and cold.

He'd trap a thought of some distant place, but the first whirling of the lights fragmented the thoughts; he was unable to hold on to them.

The light intensified, and so did the pain.

As the drum parted and the chair slid forward his wrist watch scratched his cheek.

Frantically, he grabbed the watch band, jerked the watch from his wrist.

The motor hummed, the short slide was almost over, the immobilizing lights would flash on. Or maybe they no longer bothered to magnetize him to the chair. Illya didn't know.

His mind could contain only the thought of the watch. He smashed it in his palm on the arm of the chair.

Trembling, he shook the broken shards of glass into his mouth, and dropped the watch.

At this instant the water struck him. He chewed sharp pieces of glass, feeling it cut his gums, his tongue, the roof of his mouth. He chewed again. Blood oozed from his lips.

Kuryakin could feel the temperature of the water. It was cold.

FOUR

SOLO PROWLED the small room which adjoined one of the thickly grown hothouses.

Bikini slumped against one of the three solid walls. She cried for a long time, her dark head pressed into her arms.

Solo stood at the fourth wall. It was thick green glass and afforded a view of the lushly growing cannibal plants out there.

He shook his head. He had no way to break this glass, yet it was almost as if Nesbitt wished he would. It was as though they dared him and Bikini to attempt to escape across that tangled growth.

He drew his arm across his forehead, wiping away perspiration. The cell was as hot as the hothouse beyond the glass, and more breathless.

The door was thrust open and Solo looked in that direction.

A guard stood at the opened door with a light-gun in his arms. Another entered the small hot room. He walked slowly, like a spring-wound toy that has run down.

His face was set, his eyes vacant. He faltered slightly.

Solo caught his breath. The man's face was battered, his hands cut. This was the man who had fought him at the canyon ledge, the one he'd left dangling over the precipice. He had hit him in the face with his shoe until the pain somehow got through to his consciousness.

The guard looked at Napoleon Solo, shook his head in an almost imperceptible movement, then he turned and walked, still faltering, toward Bikini.

Solo set himself to jump the guard if he harmed Bikini. He closed the armed sentry at the door from his mind. It might be the last thing he ever did for Bikini.

But the guard merely drew a folded sheet of paper from his tunic.

He held it out toward Bikini in a quivering hand.

Solo caught his breath. He recognized the form, it was a 'a summons to death' like the one delivered to Bikini's father at the hotel in Big Belt.

Bikini took it. She didn't even glance at it. She recognized it, too.

The guard turned and stalked toward the door.

Bikini jumped up. She ran to Solo and pressed herself against him, tears in her eyes. Solo closed his arms about her, comforting the miserable, frightened girl.

The guard was barely at the door when Joe, Nesbitt's Indian assistant, brushed past the door sentry.

He caught the guard by the shirt front and pushed him against the wall, as if forgetting Solo and Bikini in a sudden savage fury.

Joe switched on a wall light, marched the guard to it, forced him to stare into its brilliance. The man gazed at the bulb, unblinking. His dry eyes did not even water.

Joe spoke urgently but quietly to the man with the light fixed in his eyes. The Indian's voice was low, controlled, almost kindly. "The summons was for Napoleon Solo. The summons was for Napoleon Solo."

Solo watched Joe, fascinated. He forgot the misdelivered summons. This didn't seem very important right now. He was seeing one of Nesbitt's mindless slaves being programmed, by light. The programming was much like that done to computers, Solo thought, except that the computers' were memory tapes and transistors, and here the scientist was dealing with a man driven mindless by some sort of exquisite torture.

FIVE

THE INDIAN assistant moved toward Napoleon Solo. The man's dark face was impassive.

"We've come for the girl," Joe said.

Solo flinched, looking down at Bikini's dark head pressed on his shoulder. She was deeply asleep. She had been able to relax because she trusted him. She felt secure in his arms, even in this place.

"She's asleep," Solo said, his chilled voice warning Joe flatly to keep his hands off of her. The Indian merely smiled coldly, spoke sharply, and the two guards entered, armed with small rifles. They stood ready at Joe's side.

"You'll still have to take her," Solo said.

The Indian bent forward, catching Bikini's arm. He shook her. The girl came awake slowly, protesting.

Solo set himself. Joe shook Bikini again, lifted her. As Joe rose, Solo came up on the balls of his feet. His fist caught Joe on the jaw, staggering him.

He released his hold on Bikini and fell backwards. He struck hard against the glass wall. It trembled under his weight.

Beyond the glass the huge leaves and thick limbs quivered, set into motion by the vibration.

Solo came up, moving, crouched toward Joe.

A rifle butt caught Solo in the forehead. Bikini screamed,

Solo staggered, his legs buckling under him. He landed on his knees. Vaguely, he saw Joe pull himself up, shake his head and then order the guards out of the cell with the girl.

Solo saw it as if from a great distance, and he knew Bikini was screaming, but he could barely hear her.

The guards half-dragged Bikini to the corridor entrance of Hothouse One. Behind them, Joe tested his jaw, his face twisted.

The guards thrust open the doors. The giant plants inside set up a rustling, waving motion at the movement.

"Inside," Joe ordered.

Bikini shook her head, staring wide-eyed at the long writhing green tentacles, the huge crying leaves.

Joe jerked his head. The guards caught Bikini's arms, thrusting her through the door.

Bikini toppled on the walkway. She sprang to her feet and ran to the doors. They were closed in her face. She beat against them.

The sound set up a wild reaction among the plants. The snake-like limbs reached out, the leaves waved, the thick trunks seemed to quiver.

Bikini pressed against the door, staring in awe at the giant green plants.

From an intercom Dr. Nesbitt's voice seemed to fill the room, setting the plants in violent motion again.

"You must fight to live, my dear. You don't have a chance. As you see, some of the walks are wide. Some are almost grown over. But the wide ones are open only because the plants are pulled back. Any movement in them and the plants will crowd in, reaching out, even growing in the direction of the sound. It's the way they live, my dear."

Bikini pressed her fist over her mouth to keep from crying out.

"Perhaps if you run, my dear," Nesbitt's voice suggested. "Run. You may find a place to run. You may break free from their tentacles. You must offer some challenge to the plants, my dear, or your unfortunate death will serve no useful purpose."

Suddenly Bikini screamed.

As Nesbitt had talked, long green tentacles had struck against the walls, holding as if with suction cups, and now reached out swiftly toward her.

They approached from both sides of the door.

"You're not safe there, my dear," Nesbitt's voice taunted. "I suggest you run."

Bikini did not move. Petrified with fear, she remained pressed against the door until the slimy, serpent-like tentacles clapped against her arms from both sides.

Screaming, she broke free and ran again.

Ahead of her the center aisle seemed wide and clear. But as she ran along it, the motion of her body stirred the plants on each side into frantic action.

Trunks bent, leaves shook and tentacle limbs grasped out.

A huge arm-like limb struck her across the head and sent her reeling.

Toppling to the floor, Bikini slid along it. She remained there stunned for only a few moments, but smaller limbs, nearer the ground, sprang out, clutching at her legs, arms, dress.

"Run. Run. Run." Nesbitt's voice commanded loudly from the intercom speakers.

Bikini leaped. She realized in sudden horror that Nesbitt was like a cat playing with a mouse. When he shouted at her to run, it wasn't advice he was interested in. His voice, any sound, caused violent reactions in the plants so that they swung out, reaching toward the sound. And when she moved, this activated them even more violently.

She ran a few steps. Tentacles struck out like snakes. One closed about her throat. She caught at it, tearing it free.

Her movement brought newer limbs grabbing at her. In horror Bikini screamed, and more bushes leaned toward her, closing in upon her.

She broke free, falling away from the writhing tentacles.

She stumbled and fell to the floor on a narrow walk. The plants near her trembled, sending out eager feelers.

Holding her breath, she inched forward, and the bushes quieted behind her.

The exhausted girl laughed, on the verge of hysteria. Plants reacted, snagging at her. She lay still for some moments. The plants quieted.

When Nesbitt spoke over the intercom, they roused again, but seemed to subside.

She told herself she must lie unmoving where she was. These plants reacted to noise, lay quiescent in silence.

She lay still. For some moment nothing happened. From the intercom, Nesbitt spoke, his voice loud, taunting.

The plants quivered, rustling, unfurling long green limbs.

Bikini remained unmoving. She drew only shallow breaths. Perspiration stood on her forehead, burned into her eyes, but she did not stir, even to wipe it away.

She wanted to laugh in exhausted triumph. But she made no sound. The plants around her seemed quieted. They barely stirred, even when Nesbitt's voice rattled the intercom.

She did not know how long she could remain in this position., but she was alive, and this was all Bikini was thinking about.

Suddenly she screamed, the sound spewing from her.

She lunged upward to find green branches closed on her ankles and her legs, like ropes.

Bikini fought wildly at the limbs, breaking free. But her movement set the nearest plants in wild motion.

She leaped to her feet, trembling, and stared quickly around, her face rigid.

Then she ran, fighting the limbs around her.

Dr. Nesbitt's voice taunted her. "That's better, my dear. That's the kind of challenge that's worth while. Run, girl, run!"

ACT IV—INCIDENT OF THE TRIAL BY LIGHT

SOLO WAS LED into the circular, fantastically illuminated room by two guards.

They pointed to a bare, highly polished table, told him to sit on it. When he did they stood at attention at his side.

The room was not large, perhaps like a surgery amphitheatre, with a judge's bench on a raised dais, with six judge's chairs behind it. The desk glistened and reflected; lights.

Near the table where Solo sat was another one similar to it, and as completely bare.

Above him, and around the room in an elevated semi-circle, looking down on the bench and the two tables in the cleared area were rows of empty chairs. But after a few moments three men entered from behind the bench and took their places in the center chairs.

Solo stared at them incredulous. Action of light from the desk blotted out their faces to him. The heads were blanked out, almost as if they were headless bodies.

When the three judges had taken their places, two men entered from each side of the room. One came to the table where Solo sat, the other went to the similar table near it. Lights blotted out the faces of these two men, too, no matter where they moved.

One of the guards touched Solo's shoulder, ordering him to place the 'death summons' before him on the bared table.

This folded sheet of paper was the only materials of the trial in evidence.

A voice from a speaker in front of the judges' bench droned, "Seated are three supreme justices of the highest court. The Highest Referendary of Unquestioned Supreme Hearings is now in session. All proceedings of this court are voice recorded. Seated with the accused is his defense attorney, appointed by the Court of Supreme Hearings."

One of the judges spoke. "The prosecution may open the case of World Order versus Napoleon Solo."

The man seated at the table near Solo got to his feet. The light, blotting his face from Solo's view, followed him.

The prosecutor stalked before the bench. "Prosecution will show that the defendant is guilty of all charges listed against him before this court."

A judge said, "We will dispense with the reading of those charges."

"I'd like to hear them read," Napoleon Solo said. His defense counsel shook his light-struck head at him, warning him to be silent.

A judge said coldly, "Defendant is permitted to speak only when it is time for him to admit to the charges proved against him in this court. Until this time he must remain silent and allow his defense attorney to speak for him. Only the defense attorney will be recognized by this court."

Solo shook his head, staring up at those light-blotted faces.

The voice from the speaker said, "Defendant will step into the witness chair."

A small chair inside a cage was eased out before the bench, suspended there. When Napoleon Solo protested, his defense attorney touched his arm warningly again and the guards placed Solo inside the cage. He sat down in the low chair so that his knees were almost up to his chest. The cage door was locked.

The defense attorney sat back at the table, apparently checking over the charges in the death summons.

The prosecutor said, "Do you admit that you came to this place with the avowed purpose of violence against the people herein?"

Solo started to answer, but the judges commanded him to silence. If an answer was required, they reminded him, his defense counsel would make it.

This gentleman remained silent at the defense table.

Solo sweated in the cage, raging against this mockery of justice. Still, he knew these men were deadly serious, listening to the further charges against him shouted by the prosecutor.

"You advocate the overthrow of our way of life by force?... You entered illegally?... You attacked and assaulted the person of two of our guards... You would destroy all that we here in this room hold dear?

"Are you not guilty of these charges? And are you not guilty of the further charges of planned murder? Treason? Spying? Are you not guilty?"

The defense attorney rose then, and spoke, for the first and only time during Napoleon Solo's trial. He said in a low, sad tone, "The defendant admits guilt to all these charges. He repents of his crimes against you. He is heartily sorry for his misdoings. But he understands there can be but one sentence in accord with justice; his crimes do not permit of even the recommendation of mercy.

"He throws himself upon the mercy of this court and asks only that he be allowed to die in the manner which will serve the cause of humanity under our great system most fully."

Solo stared. A judge spoke calmly. "There will be no need to hear from the defendant. The sentence is death, to be executed in a way most benefiting our inquiries into science."

TWO

SOLO WAS led to his cell. He felt nothing as far as the sentence of the strange court was concerned. They had never suggested the trial would be impartial. The summons had ordered him to a hearing of the treasonable charges leveled against him.

He prowled the cubicle, less concerned about what would happen to him than for the safety of Illya Kuryakin and Bikini.

Solo had not learned anything about Illya since he had seen him struck down by the light beam in the corridor. And Bikini?

He shook his head in anguish, not permitting himself to think about either of them.

The door opened, suddenly. Solo stared in complete astonishment, his mouth sagged open. Illya Kuryakin walked in.

Solo shook his head, feeling ill. It was Kuryakin—or Kuryakin's body. Illya was dressed in the green fatigues that all the guards wore, and his face was rigid, his eyes empty and staring.

Illya held a light-gun across his chest. He stared straight ahead, at nothing.

Solo gazed at him.

"Illya," he said.

Illya did not even hear him.

"No good to talk to him, Mr. Solo," Nesbitt's voice rattled the intercom. "He's gone quite beyond the reach of your voice."

Solo did not speak again, watching the way Illya stood, like a robot, a living dead man.

"Mr. Kuryakin is your guard, Mr. Solo. Isn't this a nice touch? Eh? I like it irony, Solo. You will die, when your turn comes, among my plants.

"Meantime, I warn you, Mr. Kuryakin has been programmed to kill you if you attempt to escape. An ironic touch that's lovely, eh, Solo?

"Surely you appreciate its grandeur? Guarded by your own former comrade, who is now one of my mindless slaves... Yes, if you try to escape, your own former friend will kill you. As I said, we indeed all of us have inside ourselves the seeds of our own destruction."

The intercom crackled a moment. "And now I am busy, Mr. Solo. You will forgive me if I leave you to the mercies of your former friend? I warn you, he has no memory, no stirring of memory of your past association. If you make a move to escape, or to attack him, he will kill you."

The intercom went dead.

Solo passed his hand nervously across his eyes. "Illya, can't you hear me?" He stared in disbelief at his friend.

Illya didn't move and Solo's helplessness mounted. He said in desperation, "That girl, Illya. We brought her in here—and they are going to kill her—feed her to those plants."

It was as if Illya Kuryakin could not even hear him. He remained unmoving, holding the gun at ready across his chest.

Solo went tense, remembering that Joe had warned Nesbitt that the mindless ones could not be reached by ordinary conversation.

They could be reached only by light, by a voice speaking to them, programming them.

In his anxiety, Napoleon Solo took sudden swift steps toward the door.

Illya jerked the light-gun up, his finger trembling on the trigger. The eyes remained flat, dead.

Solo stopped, forced himself to return to the glass window and then to walk to the other wall, slowly. During this time he planned his next move, not looking toward Illya. He kept everything, every movement casual.

Finally Solo reached the switch which Joe had activated in order to talk to the guard earlier. Then he turned, knowing that Illya would follow.

He kept moving until the beam of the light struck Illya full in the face.

Illya did not blink.

Solo drew a deep breath, forced himself to speak softly, in the kindly, gentle gray tone that Joe had used on the guard. The light in their faces controlled them.

Light controlled everything here. Light was the source of strength, the life giving force for the plants. It meant everything, life, death, power!

Solo trembled with anxiety, realizing he had figured out the key that would open the doors to this place. Light was power, but light had to have a source.

There were no power lines into this canyon. THRUSH would not want outside power. It would open too many avenues to question.

That meant that all this light came from one source. Generators in this building.

Sweating, Solo forced himself to remain calm, to keep his voice low, level, unhurried, gentle.

The lights shone in Illya's eyes. Solo's gentle voice caressed him, "Generators. We must destroy the generators." He said it a dozen times, repeating it slowly, distinctly, without passion.

Then, seeing no response in Illya's face, he began the second phase, repeating it again and again:

"Take me to the generators. Kill anyone who tries to stop us."

Suddenly, Illya stepped out of the direct beam of the light.

Solo held his breath, waiting for Illya to bring the light-gun up to kill him.

Illya Kuryakin nodded—and winked.

THREE

ILLYA PUSHED open the cell door, jerked his head, motioning Solo ahead of him.

In the corridor Illya Kuryakin moved woodenly. Sweating, Napoleon Solo wanted to run, but knew better. He kept his pace to that set by Illya.

Suddenly Dr. Nesbitt's voice crackled wildly on the intercom and Solo knew the scientist was watching them on his screen.

Nesbitt screamed. "Guard! You fool! What are you doing? Where are you taking the prisoner?"

Indian Joe's voice crackled across Dr. Nesbitt's on the inter com. "The guard can't hear you, sir—or obey you."

"Stop them!" Dr. Nesbitt shouted.

From the lab-office, two guards raced, following the white-smocked Indian.

"This is it," Solo said from the corner of his mouth.

"Keep walking," Illya ordered.

Behind them, Indian Joe forgot his calm image. He yelled. "Escape. Escape. Stop them. Kill. Kill!"

Illya Kuryakin turned in that wooden manner, lifted the light-gun, pressed the trigger.

Holding his breath, Solo saw Joe and the three guards stagger and fall under the power of the portable light-gun.

"Now run," Illya said.

Solo didn't wait. Illya followed, carrying the gun. He stopped twice, firing along the corridor. At the down exit, Solo pushed through the door. He was half way down the steps before Illya came through and moved after him.

The pulsing of the huge generators reached up to them.

The flat-eyed men working in the engine room did not even look up at them as they ran out on the catwalk above the large turbines.

Illya Kuryakin lifted the light-gun, fired it.

The explosion rocked the engine room.

Darkness was instantaneous and complete. Illya snapped on the small light above the visor of his green cap. This was the only glow in the cavernous dark.

They ran back along the cat walk and up the steps. The building was in complete darkness.

As they came out into the corridor they heard Dr. Nesbitt's voice raging over the intercom. "My plants! The light! My plants!"

The man was beside himself with panic. Madness was in his voice, now completely unmasked.

Solo said, "We have to get Bikini. It may be too late already. Those hellish plants—"

Illya said, "Easier said than done, my friend. But we'll give it a try."

Dr. Nesbitt screamed, "You fools! You can never escape. Come with me. I can make you kings among men! As for the foolish girl—forget her. She is dead. Or she will be before you can do any thing about it! I will save you! I can make you great. I can—"

Illya said, "You are as nutty as a fruitcake, professor. Sorry to be blunt about it, old man, but good old THRUSH sold you down the creek and you can never row back. You're done, old boy. Can't say as how I'm very sorry."

Solo said, "This girl may be dying while you're talking, Illya. Let's go!"

"This way," Illya said. They ran along the corridor, Illya's small cap light bouncing ahead of them.

At door six, Hothouse One, Solo said. "The door, Illya."

Illya turned the light-gun on it.

Solo thrust it open and they ran inside.

The place was a confusion of wild rustling, writhing in the dark ness.

"Bikini!" Solo yelled.

She screamed his name from somewhere in the darkness.

"We'll have to shoot and hack our way in to her," Illya said.

A burst from the light-gun withered plants in a wide perimeter before them. The illumination showed them Bikini caught in the constricting grasp of huge branches.

"Glass!" Solo said.

Almost in the same instant, Illya Kuryakin fired, shattering one of the walls.

Solo caught up a shard and cut his way through the thick growth toward Bikini, who sobbed his name.

Illya fired short bursts of the light-gun, withering away, the plants around them as they had burned, petrifying in the jungle.

Solo cut away the last limb holding Bikini. She sagged gratefully into his arms, grasping him convulsively around the waist.

"Let's split this scene," Illya said. "They won't get the generators started, but they might get the guards out."

They went through the gun-shattered glass wall into the walled garden. Here the night was gray.

There was illumination enough to see Dr. Nesbitt standing out there with a light-gun, barring the way.

"Hit the dirt!" Solo warned. He sprang forward, carrying Bikini with him.

Dr. Nesbitt fired the light-gun, screaming like a banshee.

Illya sank to his knees, taking his time. He leveled the gun, pressed the trigger.

They saw Dr. Nesbitt drop the light-gun, stagger to his knees and pitch forward again.

Solo was already getting up, clinging to Bikini's hand, taking her with him.

With Napoleon Solo and Bikini Collins just ahead of him, Illya Kuryakin ran toward the exit, the canyon, the way out.

Behind him he heard running men, mindless howling, and the sharp sound of the burst of a gun. Illya didn't know whether the guards were after them or not, long ago programmed to foil any escape. He wasn't taking any chances.

He paused long enough to send one last burst of flame toward the darkened laboratory, and then he ran faster, into the freedom that was ahead.